Grand Rapids Community College Foundation
Instructional Improvement and Professional Development (IIPD) Grant
Report Form

IIPD guidelines require that any individual who receives an IIPD grant must submit a report on their activities within 60 days of completion of the activities. This report must be received by the GRCC Grants and Resource Development Officer in order to be considered eligible for an IIPD grant in a subsequent year. Submit your report to the Grants and Resource Development Officer, mezzanine level, College Park Plaza Building.

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Date of IIPD Award (insert year award was received):

October, 200_  March, 200__

Purpose of Grant:

To attend the 2nd International Academy on Critical Thinking at Oxford, England

Please respond to the following questions related to the activity for which you received grant funding and attach your report to this form.

1. Describe the new avenues of instruction, including changes in curriculum, teaching strategies or other changes that are resulting from your grant-funded activity.

2. How will the grant-funded activity result in an impact on student learning and enhancements to student success?

3. What steps are you taking to assess the impact of this activity on student learning?

4. How are you engaging others in the learning process and disseminating activity results with the wider campus community? NOTE: If shared learning activities have not yet taken place, an addendum to this report must be filed with the Grants Office describing shared learning activities prior to applying for another IIPD grant, as required by IIPD Guidelines.

5. Describe how the grant-funded activity is supporting the objectives of your department and your existing job responsibilities.

6. How has this grant helped in fostering your professional development goals?

Revised 2/07
Report on IIPD-Grant
Alejandro Saldivar
Fall 2008

Why go so far, to England, to learn about Instruction? Am I making good use of the resources that GRCC has trusted to me? A little doubt came to my mind as I was getting ready for my trip. Once at Oxford, it became easy to realize the value of having a conference there.

Let me start with the last point made in the conference and the motivation for its idea. Richard Paul said that “there is always a way” and if not “there is always another way” (to improve education).

One could argue that we cannot compare the University of Oxford with our Grand Rapids Community College. Many people think Oxford has an elite reputation so students are prepared and ready to study intensively; one could also think that the funding endowment of Oxford must be very large. In contrast, one thinks that our Community College has an open-door policy and that our budget or resources are small in comparison. However, I was surprised to see many similarities!

We had the opportunity to talk to tutors and professors, and found out that “students are students” and not all of their students are stellar; Often times, students do not finish their homework or do not study sufficiently. And Oxford is beginning to have tightened funding. Faculty and administrators are trying to figure out ways to maintain a high level of instructional quality with fewer resources.

What became extremely clear at Oxford was the care and devotion of faculty and tutors for their students’ learning. The University of Oxford has a special teaching format. Students are assigned a Tutor for each one of their courses. Students meet their tutor about once a week. Mind that the tutors are not as we understand them in American schools. Tutors are similar to professors and consequently students have, in practice, two teachers for each course. The tutors assign additional written work for the students with the aim of developing deeper understanding of their subjects. Then tutors read students’ responses and provide criticism right on the spot. Here is where we notice two significant differences between Oxford and American schools. First, the additional work students perform is deeper in nature and, second, students obtain instantaneous personal feedback.

1. New Avenues of Instruction

This Academy, along with previous conferences, has given me a solid framework for improving instruction using Critical Thinking. Quite often one asks how critical thinking can be implemented into mathematics courses, since mathematics seems like a collection of formulas or procedures that are applied. It is difficult to implement critical thinking,
but possible and well worth it, for the improvement of curriculum. As a consequence of the change in curriculum, assessment has to change accordingly.

The following are two changes in teaching strategies:

The first change in teaching strategies consists in making students aware of the importance of “language” in the field. Students must gain command of the way they talk, in this case, mathematics. Regularly, students confuse the words equation and expression, or opposite and reciprocal, for example. Expressing mathematical ideas well helps students truly understand how to solve problems. Otherwise students simply copy methods and processes, hoping they understand what they are doing. The draw back of this strategy is that instructors must devote more time reviewing writing, with the consequence of having to check grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and composition in general.

A second change in teaching strategy consists in constant and continuous follow-up of students’ answers. The following are possible questions to ask students after they solve a problem: “Why did you do that?” “Is there another way to solve the problem?” “How can we be sure that your answer is correct?” “Could you elaborate, or generalize?” “Could you give some examples?” etc. In this case, the instructor must become skillful at asking good questions and at staying focused. Also the assessment of student understanding must change accordingly; a good adjustment could be an oral examination.

2. Student Success

Student Success can be a tricky issue. First we need to review what we mean by “success”. For some observers, success could be measured by grades and passing rates. This is not a particularly good way to measure success because it could easily lead to grade inflation.

A better way to measure success is to find out how students use, if at all, what they learn in our courses and whether they are successful in further courses. Implementing the strategies mentioned above definitely helps students in their communication skills. By improving their language in the field, students can easily communicate with instructors and other professionals who use the same language. Students also get used to being prepared to answer follow-up questions, and students themselves get used to asking follow-up questions in general situations. The following situation provides a possible application of the new strategies: A student opens a certificate of deposit account and is told that the interest is 4%; the student can ask whether the interest is compounded daily, or monthly, or quarterly.

3. Assessing Impact of Activity

At this point of the semester my plan is to prepare a questionnaire for all students who complete my courses. The questionnaire should focus on whether students appreciate the
emphasis on critical thinking and whether this emphasis helps them understand the learned concepts. I also plan to ask students for suggestions for improvements. I plan to seek the help of colleagues in my department as I put together this questionnaire.

4. Dissemination

I am in talks with Liz Timmer, from the Learning Academy, to plan an activity to help other faculty implement Critical Thinking in their courses and curriculum. Liz will help me with ancillaries such as contacts, scheduling, CARP, etc.

I have led a Critical Thinking Circle and have given salon and Learning Day presentations on the topic. Of course, I plan to continue these activities.

5. Objectives of my Department and Existing Job Responsibilities

Our department is certainly concerned with our students’ deep understanding of mathematics, the transferability of learned topics to other disciplines, and that students are well prepared for further studies. Critical Thinking directly affects all three objectives. Critical Thinking helps students become aware of their learning thus deepening their knowledge. With the help of Critical Thinking students are not just following examples, they can ask insightful questions such as “what is the author’s purpose when showing two similar examples?” As a consequence of profound learning students can carry ideas across disciplines and advanced courses.

One of my roles in the college has been, for a few years now, a leader in Critical Thinking. I have been very active in Critical Thinking as a member of the Assessment Team led by Elaine Kampmueller and under Patti Trepkowski. As I mentioned in 4. above, I have led a Critical Thinking Circle and have given salon and Learning Day presentations on the topic. I continue to attend seminars, conferences, and academies to stay updated on this important professional development.

6. Professional Development

There is no doubt that students greatly benefit from extensive training in Critical Thinking. But helping students develop Critical Thinking does not happen by chance of accident. I believe that it has been assumed that by studying a variety of topics one can develop thinking skills. This has been true to some extent; however, we are at a point in American education where we need to make more apparent and clear connections between studying a topic and thinking better. Critical Thinking makes this connection. Unfortunately, Critical Thinking has not been a conscious part of formal education as in a graduate degree or even a degree in education. Consequently, faculty professional development opportunities are necessary to achieve a solid understanding of Critical Thinking and its frameworks, so thus help our students become better thinkers.

I am very thankful that GRCC supports Professional Development for the betterment of student learning.