

**Final Report/Project Summary for the Lexington Seminar  
May 25, 2006**

A Brief Overview of Ashland Theological Seminary

Though Ashland Theological Seminary shares many characteristics in common with other seminaries, we also have some unique traits. We are a diverse community. In our student body over 30% are minority students, 51% are women, and over 70 different denominations are represented. Though the seminary is sponsored by the Brethren Church, only about 5% of the students are Brethren. The faculty likewise reflects diversity with 4 women, 4 minority faculty, and 10 different denominations represented among the 22 faculty members. Only 5 faculty members are Brethren. The seminary ceased to be primarily a residential campus in the 1980s; this was partially fueled by the development of extensions in Cleveland, Detroit, and Columbus. The majority of our students are non-traditional, non-residential, and many are second career.

Ashland Theological Seminary also has a complex relationship with Ashland University. In many ways the seminary functions as a separate institution, though it is governed by the same Board of Trustees. The seminary has its own campus, controls its own budget, makes its own personnel decisions, and has its own library and staff. The seminary is not affiliated with the religion or philosophy departments at the university and tends to be on a separate “page” theologically from either of these departments. The seminary accrues a number of benefits by being linked to the university, which provides such administrative services as payroll, personnel, and financial aid for the seminary. The seminary also has access to such university academic services as the Instructional Technology Department, the Writing Center, and Student Support Services, though we do not control these services or supervise their personnel.

The seminary possesses strong theological agreement among faculty and students. The great majority identify themselves as evangelical or theologically conservative. Ashland does possess some challenges because of its constituencies. Some of the traditions we represent have historically been suspicious of education. These traditions have placed more emphasis on calling than on academic preparation. The increasing presence of these students in seminary shows a major shift in the thinking of these groups, but their students don't have the heritage of emphasis on critical reflection present in some other traditions. Part-time commuting students, as well as extension campus schedules, make course sequencing a challenge. The three extension campuses add rich cultural diversity to the seminary but also reflect the inherited consequences of economic disadvantages and poor educational systems that are found in some of these urban settings.

## Issue and Context

Ashland Theological Seminary's narrative focused on the need for better writing and critical thinking skills among our students. This is a widespread problem throughout education, including theological education, today. The reasons for this problem are complex. Some students lack preparation at the undergraduate level both in writing and critical thinking skills. Many students coming to seminary don't have undergraduate degrees in religion or even in the humanities. Second-career students who have been out of school for many years may need refresher work in preparation for theological education. The well-known deficiencies in the American educational system likewise exacerbate this problem.

### *Theoretical foundation*

Essential to our initiative was defining what we were looking for in writing and critical thinking skills. Even before our involvement in the Lexington Seminar, the faculty had adopted a statement on academic excellence. Our statement was an adaptation (with permission) of a statement by the University of St. Thomas. It defines academic excellence in relationship to the institution, the faculty, the students, and the administration. The institutional part of the statement reads as follows:

At Ashland Theological Seminary, academic excellence is part of our response to the call of Christ, involving personal integrity, disciplined teaching and learning, responsible scholarship, biblical knowledge and wisdom, critical reflection, and a commitment to lifelong learning that lead to the personal transformation of faculty, students, and administration in the context of Christian service.

Our further work in critical thinking developed from this understanding.

The Ashland faculty believe that writing and critical thinking are two dimensions of a single issue. The ability to think clearly and the ability to communicate effectively are integrally related. Critical thinking gives depth to writing, and writing clarifies thinking. We want our students to develop godly wisdom by actively engaging as whole persons in the process of understanding reality from the perspective of Christian faith. To do so, they need skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking.

The ability to engage in critical reflection and effective communication is essential for students to do well in theological education. However, it is also valuable in itself as a means of personal transformation, which is the goal of theological education at Ashland. Critical reflection is an indispensable aspect of discerning and living out one's calling. It is also necessary for effective ministry to the church and to the world. Faculty conversations at various times over the last several years had identified the following summary list of qualities important in critical reflection in our context:

- Firm grounding in Christ
- Self-awareness

- Openness to new perspectives
- Ability to recognize assumptions in one's own thinking and that of others
- Ability to formulate fruitful questions
- Ability to gather and evaluate evidence
- Ability to construct, analyze, and evaluate arguments
- Ability to draw conclusions and make decisions
- Ability to exercise spiritual discernment
- Ability to communicate effectively in oral and written forms

### ***Refinement of the Project through the Lexington Seminar Experience***

At the deans' gathering in March 2004 and the Lexington Seminar gathering in Maine the following June, interaction with representatives from the other participating schools convinced us that we needed to address the topic of critical thinking with a two-pronged approach. The first prong dealt with faculty: we needed to be clear about what we meant by critical thinking and how we could design courses that enhanced critical thinking skills. The second prong was to develop a process for assessing student preparedness for theological education specifically in the areas of writing and critical thinking skills and provide remediation for those who needed it. This two-pronged approach targeting both faculty and students framed Ashland Theological Seminary's project.

The Lexington Seminar team established the following goals for our project:

- To engage faculty in focused discourse on critical thinking.
- To develop consensus on what critical thinking looks like in theological education.
- To encourage faculty to incorporate critical thinking skills into their teaching.
- To help faculty redesign their courses to reinforce the acquisition of critical thinking skills.
- To develop an assessment process to gauge student preparedness for theological education.
- To create various remediation modules to address deficient skills and prepare students for introductory hermeneutical, biblical, and theological core courses.

### Faculty Engagement with Critical Thinking

#### ***Project Design and Resources Used in Developing and Implementing the Project***

Ashland's Lexington Seminar team, in conversation with the Associate Academic Dean, decided to engage faculty in discussion about critical thinking in a retreat format with an outside resource person who could facilitate our conversations. The entire faculty spent two days in April 2005 at the Carlisle Inn in Sugarcreek, Ohio, in the middle of Amish country. Our resource person was a leader in the field of adult education and critical reflection. In preparation for the retreat, all faculty were given a copy of one of the resource person's works on critical thinking and were encouraged to

read it beforehand. The sessions with the faculty were very much a hands-on approach to critical thinking, utilizing a number of exercises to reinforce essential aspects of critical reflection and to model classroom techniques to encourage students to become critically reflective learners. However, there was a general feeling among the faculty that the resource person did not sufficiently attempt to tailor his presentation to a theological community,

Several faculty members volunteered to help guide discussions about critical thinking after the main presenter departed. These discussions focused on several applications of critical thinking: as departments we discussed how critical reflection might be uniquely expressed in our disciplines; meeting separately as faculty and administrators we discussed various hindrances to critical thinking in our areas of responsibility; and as a “committee of the whole” we identified elements of critical thinking especially as they related to theological education.

### ***Project Results***

Faculty were recently canvassed about how they had made practical use of the insights from the seminar. Following are some of the responses from faculty:

- “I have tried a couple of things: more on-going evaluations and feedback of students’ experiences in class and providing more structure to small group/team assignments.”
- “I used a feedback report throughout my New Testament II class during the Spring Quarter (after reading the book), and discussed the feedback briefly at the start of each class. I also gave the major part of each class over to student questions and concerns about the NT texts and textbook selections for each week.”
- “Since the seminar, I have been willing to spell out for my students my opinion on a topic. In the past I would not always [do this] since I thought it was encouraging them to think for themselves without accepting my opinion simply because I was the professor. But [the resource person] noted that this can cause an atmosphere of distrust and I have since made some adjustments.”
- “One of the very practical ‘conceptual’ pieces I gleaned from the presentations was the importance of soliciting class feedback regarding the students’ needs and expectations regarding classroom management and information flow/presentation (e.g., the pacing of lecture material, useful classroom practices, need for greater depth/less depth, etc.). A second principle I strive to monitor and modify, when possible, is the presence of various power differentials in the room. I seek to minimize those discrepancies to encourage feedback/participation of all students. I sometimes try to tailor content or examples (e.g., vignettes) to highlight the existence of such differentials in an effort to validate student experiences and encourage active participation.”
- “I have added an item or two on the student course evaluations to provide faculty and the program with feedback on how we are doing in modeling critical thinking.”

The seminar did raise faculty consciousness that we have some learning to do about critical reflection. The faculty were generally desirous of focusing attention on developing critical thinking skills in their students, but the seminar reminded us that we do not always model good critical thinking skills ourselves.

If we had it to do over, our involvement in the Lexington Seminar would not have been at a time when our faculty were already stretched with so many add-on commitments: curriculum review, accreditation self-study, faculty searches, presidential search. There will always be competitors for faculty energy, but we did not gain as much as we could have out of the process because of the demands on faculty time and emotional energy.

More faculty follow-up to the seminar would have been beneficial. Two realities worked against this: the aforementioned demands on faculty time and the fact that the seminar was so late in the spring—we could not follow up until the fall and by then much momentum had been lost. As a result of these realities, the faculty have not yet arrived at a common definition of critical thinking. We made a good beginning at the retreat, but other pressing issues in the life of the seminary have taken priority. Our next step in the process for critical thinking would be to gather our previous reflections and lead the faculty in developing a consensus statement.

It is gratifying that a number of faculty have continued to make use of insights gleaned from the seminar. In spite of the disappointment felt by the faculty that the resource speaker did not adapt his presentations to a theological community, his insights were, nonetheless, helpful in addressing the larger issue of developing teaching styles and techniques that are appropriate for adult learners.

### The Student Phase of the Project

#### ***Project Design and Resources Used in Developing and Implementing the Project***

During the spring of 2005, one of our team members received a one-course reduction in her teaching responsibilities to develop the proposal for student assessment and intervention. During that time, this faculty member researched resources on writing and critical thinking, reviewed instruments, talked to faculty, etc. She then drew up a proposal which was approved by our Lexington Seminar team and presented to faculty.

The proposal called for incoming students to take online assessments of writing and critical thinking skills. The proposal stipulated that the writing assessment would be held before the beginning of fall quarter classes and the critical thinking assessment sometime during fall quarter. The writing assessment would be scored electronically and by the Director of the Writing Center. Students who needed remediation in either area would be referred to workshops and/or one-on-one tutoring provided by the Ashland University Writing Center. This determination would be made by the Director of the Writing Center in consultation with the Associate Dean.

An online WebCT course on writing skills would be made available on an ongoing basis for students who wanted to use it and for students who were given assignments in it as part of their work with the Writing Center. The course would include both instructional material and graded exercises. Students who were assigned to take the online course would be supervised and held accountable by the Director of the Writing Center, who would report on student progress to the Associate Dean.

A web page with online resources on writing and critical thinking would be developed and made available in connection with the seminary's web site. It would also be linked to the site for the Graduate Writing Center. As part of the project, we planned for students to evaluate their experience with the assessments and support services so that we could find ways to improve them.

### **Writing Skills**

To assess writing skills, we selected the Criterion program developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The seminary sent a letter to all new students informing them of the assessment and providing a schedule of potential testing times. Students selected their preferred testing time and returned the registration form. Although Criterion is an online tool, we elected to proctor the assessment rather than allowing students to take it on their own. This was the recommendation of the Educational Testing Service.

During the summer, we offered seven sessions on the Ashland Campus, two sessions at the Cleveland extension, one session at the Columbus extension, and three sessions at the Detroit Center. The assessment was also conducted at three orientation sessions in September for students who had been unable to attend the summer sessions. The Director of the Writing Center proctored each of the 16 sessions. Although this was very time-consuming for her, it did give her some interaction with all of the participants. We hope this will bear fruit in increased use of the Writing Center.

Each writing session was assigned one of six possible essay topics by Criterion. Students were given a paragraph that took a position on a particular issue and then asked to respond with a critical analysis of the paragraph. They were given 45 minutes to complete their essay. Each essay was scored holistically by the computer program on a scale from zero to six with six being high. Students who scored four or less were required to attend a workshop conducted by the Director of the Writing Center. Of the 162 new students, 150 completed the writing assessment, with a mean score of 4.2. The breakdown of the holistic scores is as follows:

Score of 6 (11.3%)	Score of 3 (22.7%)
Score of 5 (17.3%)	Score of 2 (4.7%)
Score of 4 (42%)	Score of 1 (2.0%)

We had some frustrations with the Criterion program, especially with its scoring system. The program placed more emphasis on critical thinking skills than writing skills, particularly on the student's ability to respond to the argument of the prompt paragraph. While we initially thought the element of critical thinking would be an advantage in this program, it actually made the evaluation of writing more problematic. Although Criterion gave students feedback on grammar and mechanics and expressed a concern for these in its printed grading rubrics, these were apparently not considered when awarding the holistic score. This point emerged part-way through the process in conversations with people at ETS. We also noticed a strong correlation between the length of the essay and the holistic score (the longer the essay, the higher the score).

We had understood that the Director of the Writing Center would evaluate each of the essays; we were relying on this to help us to evaluate the Criterion program itself. However, the director informed us that she had evaluated only a sample of the essays. To get more data, we paid a student with excellent writing skills to score each of the essays using Criterion's scoring rubric. However, in testing for inter-rater reliability, we found very low correlation between the electronic scores and the human grader's scores. One comparison doesn't give us enough information to really evaluate the program, but it is not encouraging.

### **Critical Thinking Skills**

To assess critical thinking, we selected two instruments: the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) and the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI), both developed by Insight Assessment. These assessments measure competencies in and attitudes toward critical thinking, respectively.

Students were informed at the September orientation sessions that they would be taking a critical thinking assessment. Instructions were mailed to each new student. Students could take these assessments on their home computers or in the computer labs on the Ashland campus. About ten minutes were required for the disposition inventory and 45 minutes for the skills test.

Some students had difficulty logging into the system, but all who attempted were eventually able to take the assessment. Of the 162 new students, 106 completed the assessments. Both assessments were multiple-choice inventories. The CCTDI measured truth-seeking, openmindedness, analyticity, systematicity, self confidence in critical thinking, inquisitiveness, and cognitive maturity. The CCTST evaluated induction, deduction, analysis, inference, and evaluation. Since the picture of the ideal critical thinker may vary among different contexts, we asked our faculty to take both assessments in order to create a norm by which to evaluate the student assessments. Of our 22 faculty, nine completed the assessments.

Students means on the CCTDI were as follows: truth-seeking (41.51), openmindedness (42.40), analyticity (44.94), systematicity (45.54), CT self confidence (47.02), inquisitiveness (48.63), and cognitive maturity (48.71). Faculty means were as

follows: truth-seeking (45.74), openmindedness (44.17), analyticity (48.79), systematicity (44.44), CT self confidence (49.01), inquisitiveness (50.44), and cognitive maturity (50.22). On the CCTST, student means were as follows: induction (9.88), deduction (7.79), analysis (4.82), inference (8.10), and evaluation (4.74). Faculty means were as follows: induction (10.22), deduction (8.56), analysis (4.78), inference (8.67), and evaluation (5.33). We have not analyzed the significance of these scores, beyond noting that on all scales Ashland students and faculty scored above the mean scores for college students.

Although there was some anxiety about the assessments, the great majority of students responded positively to the writing resources we provided for them. As of yet, we have not provided any support services for critical thinking. The Writing Center does offer workshops in this area, but we have not yet determined a standard on which to base referrals. We have not yet asked students to evaluate the assessments and support services, though this is still planned.

### ***Project Results***

The Lexington Seminar team identified both problems and positive outcomes for the student phase of the project.

#### **Problems:**

- Decentralization: No single person oversaw the entire project. Implementation was shared among the Academic Dean, the Associate Academic Dean, the Director of the Writing Center, and the faculty member who researched the writing and critical thinking tools.
- Uneven coordination: The result of the previous point. Although everyone involved communicated frequently, some issues were inadvertently neglected.
- Overworked staff: It is counterproductive to assign a new project to people who are already overworked. With a single exception, the one course release time given to the faculty member mentioned above, those who were involved in the project had to do it in addition to all the things they were already doing.
- Institutional issues: The Director of the Writing Center is an employee of Ashland University rather than of the seminary. Only a portion of her time is devoted to our needs. Although she devoted a great deal of time to giving the writing assessment, we do not control the allocation of her time, and she is not directly accountable to us. Competing obligations meant that she was not available to us for some aspects of the project, such as evaluating the assessment instrument and overseeing the online course.
- Lack of follow through: The Director of the Writing Center did not grade the essays as we expected she would.
- Changes in the assessment instrument: A new version of Criterion went online in the middle of our testing process, causing some confusion and requiring duplication of effort.

- Miscommunication concerning the assessment instrument: It was sometimes difficult to find people who could speak authoritatively about the capabilities of the assessment instruments. During the testing process, the Associate Academic Dean learned from ETS that Criterion does not count grammar and mechanics in the holistic score, even though it provides a rating and feedback for them. This was a concern for us, since grammar and mechanics were a significant element of what we wanted to test.
- Low faculty participation on some issues: Since only nine faculty took the critical thinking assessment, we do not have a good sample to establish a norm for the instrument in our context. However, faculty with expertise in testing are reviewing the instruments and the data to see what we can conclude.

**Positive outcomes:**

- Institutional commitment: Faculty, administration, and students have become more aware of the importance of writing and critical thinking skills. The writing assessment data indicated the extent of the problem. We have developed an institutional commitment to deal with the problem. Professors are attending more to writing and critical thinking in their assignments, and students are making much more use of resources such as tutoring and writing workshops.
- Institutional dialogue: We have begun an ongoing conversation on these issues that will continue to bear fruit through our curriculum review process.
- New tools: We are still in conversation about the usefulness of particular tools in assessing writing and critical thinking skills. If we decide that existing tools are not helpful, we will attempt to develop our own.
- Improved student performance: Some faculty have reported improvement in student writing, including at our extension campuses. This is significant, since one of our concerns is to make sure our extension students have access to the same resources as our main campus students. Reports of improvement are anecdotal so far, but they are encouraging.
- New positions: We now have writing tutors at all extensions except for Columbus, and we expect to add one there. Students have been making extensive use of this resource this year. Furthermore, this study has convinced everyone of the need for a staff position to oversee academic support services. This position will oversee student assessment, placement, and remediation, as well as some aspects of academic advising. We hope to have this position filled in July 2006.

***Project Results and Conclusions***

The Lexington Seminar team developed the following conclusions about our project in general:

- We will continue to assess student skills in writing and critical thinking, although we will probably not use the particular instruments in this study. The simplest and most cost-effective option is probably the traditional one of a paper essay evaluated by a

human grader. However, we will continue to explore possible instruments to complement the paper essay, either in paper or electronic format.

- We need to have more faculty dialogue on critical thinking, especially about how critical thinking would appear in different cultural contexts and in different disciplines. This dialogue should result in a consensus statement on critical thinking to complement our statement on academic excellence.
- The results of our Lexington Seminar project will be folded into the work of our curriculum review and assessment committees. For example, the Committee on Assessment is in the process of developing rubrics for professors to use in evaluating student writing. Critical thinking issues are being reflected in the learning outcomes that are being developed for degree programs and core courses in the curriculum review process. We also hope to incorporate assessments on writing and critical thinking in one or more of the foundational courses we are developing in our curriculum review process. Having all students in an introductory class submit one paper to the Writing Center would remove any stigma that might be associated with selective assignment to tutoring or workshops.
- Once we have settled on a program of assessment and remediation, our goals in writing and critical thinking will have to be reinforced throughout the curriculum. Students will also have to be reassessed later in their seminary experience (especially at the end) in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

### *Sharing the Wisdom*

- Our tentative conclusion is that there are as yet no electronic instruments available that effectively assess freeform writing. There may be better options with grammar/mechanics and critical thinking.
- New projects require adequate structures and personnel.
- The project was necessary to get the institution moving to deal with our issue. Without the impetus of the project, we would not have been able to address our problem as soon as we did or to explore some of the options we did. We have been able to experiment, and we have learned from what didn't work as well as from what did.
- The curriculum review will build on our work to develop a more comprehensive solution.
- We are grateful to the Lexington Seminar for giving us this opportunity.

Accounting for Lexington Seminar Grant

Resource Speaker Expenses	\$6,000.00
Faculty Retreat Expenses	3,332.35
Educational Testing Service (Writing Assessment)	1,004.00
Insight Assessment (Critical Thinking Assessment)	2,667.00
Stipend for Writing Center Graduate Assistants (Detroit and Cleveland)	<u>1,996.65</u>
Total	\$15,000.00