

3 Reasons & 3 Responses

The balance of reasons weighs heavily against approving Hist B9: “Historical Methods: Critical Thinking & Writing in History” for General Education critical thinking. This piece presents 3 reasons for rejecting such approval and responds to 3 reasons offered by the originator.

The 3 reasons not to approve presented here are:

1) There is no evidence that HIST B9 will improve students’ critical thinking abilities.

There is neither BC data nor ANY academic research support that this course increases student critical thinking aptitudes or abilities. The request last year for and an offer of help to get such data was summarily rejected. The course, if approved, would divert students away from courses with ample research support.

2) The History Department has neither composition nor critical thinking expertise.

No department is ideally situated to teach IGETC 1B courses in composition and critical thinking. English is great teaching composition while Philosophy and Communication are great teaching critical thinking (formal reasoning and debating). History has neither expertise in teaching composition nor in teaching critical thinking.

3) HIST B9 is neither a composition nor a critical thinking course.

Every course meeting any General Education requirement must have a critical thinking component, but critical thinking needs to be the **main focus** of courses meeting CSU General Education critical thinking. IGETC critical thinking courses need a dual focus on composition and critical thinking. HIST B9 is neither: it is a historical methods course with a dash of critical thinking and a smidgeon of composition tossed in.

The 3 responses to reasons given by the originator presented here are:

A) No, nearly all critical thinking courses statewide are in Philosophy, English, or Communication.

The aphorism “the exception proves the rule” should guide your thinking here. Of the 658 courses meeting CSU/IGETC critical thinking requirements at the 115 community colleges in California, only 28 (4%) are offered outside ENGL/PHIL/COMM (96%). Outliers shouldn’t determine your decision.

B) No, there is no need at BC for a critical thinking course in History.

For Fall 2020, at least a year before this course could be offered, existing courses will be sufficient to meet all student need for both CSU and UC critical thinking courses.

C) No, we should not just let IGETC reviewers decide for us.

The Bakersfield College Curriculum Committee should not “aspire” to be the Taft College Curriculum Committee. IGETC approval is a stochastic process: they inexplicably reject or approve courses. We ought not to hand our responsibility to unknown actors.

Works Cited

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Reason 1) There is no evidence that HIST B9 will improve students' critical thinking abilities.

There is neither BC data nor ANY academic research support that this course increases student critical thinking aptitudes or abilities. The request last year for and an offer of help to get such data was summarily rejected. The course, if approved, would divert students away from courses with ample research support.

Our students' critical thinking abilities and aptitudes are one of the, if not the, most important outcomes of their time at Bakersfield College. This isn't just the conclusion of someone who has spent his entire adult life teaching critical thinking. Professors Huber and Kuncel begin their meta-analysis of critical thinking studies by noting that:

"This interest is particularly evident in college, where critical thinking has gained traction as a crucial component of general education ([Arum & Roksa, 2011](#); [Halpern, 2001](#)). A recent study reported that faculty endorsed teaching critical thinking as the most important goal of undergraduate education, with over 99% describing it as "very important" or "essential" ([DeAngelo et al., 2009](#), p. 3)."

Approving a course to meet critical thinking requirements for which there is NO data showing that it will, in fact, improve students' critical thinking abilities and aptitudes is simply reckless.

This is especially problematic because the Bakersfield College General Education Guiding Notes, for both CSLOs and Criteria, focus on actually improving a variety of critical thinking skills and aptitudes. Five of the 7 CSLOs, for example, use the word "skillfully" while 8 of the 10 criteria use the word "ability." Two of the criteria are "lead to the ability to reason inductively" and "lead to the ability to reason deductively." That there is NO evidence that this course will actually improve students' critical thinking aptitudes and abilities ought to be determinative.

There is an extensive body of research about the effectiveness of critical thinking pedagogy. Thousands of studies conducted over the last 70 years and dozens of meta-analyses have examined whether and which courses, modalities of delivery, external factors, and content actually improve students' critical thinking. There are a half-dozen well-known instruments to measure critical thinking abilities and aptitudes. That there isn't a single study showing that this course would increase critical thinking ability is telling.

College-level courses in logic and philosophical reasoning as well as courses in argumentation and debate have an extensive collection of studies and meta-studies demonstrating effectiveness in increasing general critical thinking ability and aptitudes. Other courses have mixed, minimal, or non-existent research support.

In Communication, the ability of argumentation and debating to improve general critical thinking skills and aptitudes is obsessively critiqued and studied. Allen et al (1999), for example, performed a meta-analysis of studies examining whether and to what extent argumentation courses and debating improved critical thinking skills and aptitudes. They noted the existence of a substantial number of quantitative studies, examining whether argumentation and debate impacted critical thinking.

“The concern of educators has prompted a series of investigations over the past 50 years exploring the impact of communication skill experiences on critical thinking using both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs.... The current data base is sufficient to justify the use of meta-analysis as a means of summarization.”

The conclusion of the Allen et al (1999) meta-analysis, for example, was that communication-based critical thinking courses improved general critical thinking skills and aptitudes:

“The most important outcome of the present meta-analysis is that regardless of the specific measure used to assess critical thinking, the type of design employed, or the specific type of communication skill training taught, critical thinking improved as a result of training in communication skills. The findings illustrate that participation in public communication skill building exercises consistently improved critical thinking. Participation in forensics demonstrated the largest improvement in critical thinking scores whether considering longitudinal or cross-sectional designs.”

In Philosophy, improving critical thinking is a fundamental objective and the effectiveness of critical thinking courses in the discipline has been widely studied. Ortiz (2007), for example, conducted a meta-analysis of studies examining the effectiveness of critical thinking courses in improving critical thinking skills and aptitudes. She included 52 studies, an extensive body of evidence, examining whether critical thinking instruction in philosophy and other disciplines improved general critical thinking skills and aptitudes.

Ortiz concluded that philosophy-based critical thinking courses improved undergraduate students' critical thinking abilities by 0.49 standard deviation while traditional (dedicated) critical thinking courses taught outside of philosophy resulted in gains of 0.40 standard deviation. She also noted that courses with “some” critical thinking instruction resulted in smaller increases in critical thinking ability, 0.26 standard deviation.

There is a single study which has examined whether a History course at a Florida Community College improved critical thinking ability. That course was very different from HIST B9: it infused Richard Paul's critical thinking model into every aspect of the course throughout the semester rather than setting aside a short block of time to teaching pieces of informal reasoning. That study had mixed results using 3 different critical thinking metrics, despite being conducted by the instructors themselves. Last year, the originator of HIST B9 agreed that study didn't present any evidence that HIST B9 would improve student critical thinking.

Courses which seek to meet the general education critical thinking requirement ought to be able to present a body of evidence indicating that the course would obtain substantial critical thinking gains.

Reason 2) The History Department has neither composition nor critical thinking expertise.

No department is ideally situated to teach IGETC 1B courses in composition and critical thinking. English is great teaching composition while Philosophy and Communication are great teaching critical thinking (formal reasoning and debating). History has neither expertise in teaching composition nor in teaching critical thinking.

We all can write well: we have taken classes in composition and wouldn't have gotten degrees without coursework in how to compose essays, including argumentative essays. All of us could also do a serviceable job of teaching students the basics of composing an essay if called upon to do so. That doesn't mean we have expertise in teaching college students advanced composition. The English Department and related departments on campus do have that expertise, however.

It is no slight on the History faculty to point out that they have no special expertise in teaching composition, any more than to point out that they have no special expertise in teaching music, graphic design, soil science, cognitive psychology, or calculus.

We can all reason well: graduate schools require a GRE score before admission, and the GRE assesses our reasoning/critical thinking abilities. All of us could do a serviceable job of teaching students the basics of a good argument if we had to. That doesn't mean we have expertise in teaching college students critical thinking. The Philosophy Department, by teaching formal logic and reasoning does and the Communication Department, by teaching students debate and informal reasoning, do have that expertise.

Once again, it is no slight on the History Department to point out that they have no special expertise in teaching logic, formal and informal reasoning, or debate. Their expertise is in teaching History.

Finally, as far as the UC composition and critical thinking requirement is concerned, no Department on campus is perfectly situated to teach both composition and critical thinking. English is great at teaching college students composition while Philosophy and Communication are great at teaching critical thinking. History doesn't have special expertise teaching either of those.

Reason 3) HIST B9 is neither a composition nor a critical thinking course.

Every course meeting any General Education requirement must have a critical thinking component, but critical thinking needs to be the **main focus** of courses meeting CSU General Education critical thinking. IGETC critical thinking courses need a dual focus on composition and critical thinking. HIST B9 is neither: it is a historical methods course with a dash of critical thinking and a smidgeon of composition tossed in.

The Course Outline of Record for Hist B9 has little information about the specific content of the class. The information provided shows that critical thinking is sidelined in favor of teaching History. The claim is made that a mere 20% of the course content will be devoted to logical reasoning while the other 80% is devoted to 20% Historiography, 20% to the use of primary and secondary sources, and 30% to a research project. Contrast that distribution to those courses which meet a CSU critical thinking requirement that devote roughly 100% of their time to critical thinking through teaching logic, formal and informal reasoning, or debating.

The HIST B9 COR devotes NO time in the curriculum to explicit instruction in general composition. True, several of the textbooks teach students how to write history and the project presumably does the same, but instruction in how to write a historical essay is not instruction in composition generally. The courses which meet the UC critical thinking requirement, by contrast, devote substantial time and effort in teaching general composition.

The instructional texts listed in the COR are an indication of whether the course is a critical thinking course or a course in historical methods trying to get approval for critical thinking with a dash of critical thinking and a smidgeon of composition. All but 2 of the 11 texts are History texts. The 2 critical thinking texts seem an odd addition, much like the 20% of course context affixed to the instruction in Historical Methods.

Finally, the SLOs for the HIST B9 do not purport to improve general critical thinking aptitudes or abilities. The 3 SLOs are:

- 1. Upon successful completion of the course, students will evaluate forms of logical reasoning and fallacies common in historical analysis.**
- 2. Upon successful completion of the course, students will orally and/or in writing describe, discuss, and apply an understanding of history as a discipline characterized by the application of critical analysis to factual evidence.**
- 3. Upon successful completion of the course, students will frame a historical question, identify and interpret sources (both primary and secondary), and produce a self-revised research paper.**

Each of the 3 SLOs is explicit in situating the student outcomes within the discipline of History. The first SLO does not seek to improve students' general critical thinking ability, but only those abilities in and for "historical analysis." The second SLO is explicitly concerned with students' ability to understand history. The third SLO, similarly, is concerned with students' ability to produce a research paper about a "historical question."

There is a substantial difference between discipline or domain-specific critical thinking skills and aptitudes and general critical-thinking skills and aptitudes. Thinking critically about matters specific to psychology, nursing, criminal justice, or history, for example, is different than thinking critically about general issues across disciplines and in general life-contexts.

Those differences have been studied extensively. General critical thinking skills and aptitudes apply to reasoning, evidence, and judgement in all domains of life, whether personal, financial, employment, public policy, or socio-cultural matters. Domain-specific critical thinking skills and aptitudes apply to a given discipline and the issues presented in that discipline.

Domain-specific critical thinking skills and aptitudes typically are assessed with different instruments than are general critical thinking skills and aptitudes.

While it is, no doubt, valuable to provide students with critical thinking instruction within a given discipline, that instruction is unlikely to yield gains in general critical thinking ability. Subject-matter courses are generally not effective in increasing general critical thinking skills and aptitudes. As Hatcher (2006) noted:

“In 2001, one extensive survey concluded that ‘specialized courses in critical thinking have generally been successful in promoting this skill, but recent attempts to infuse critical thinking activities into subject-matter courses have yielded marginal results’ (Williams & Worth, 2001)”

HIST B9 is not a composition course and not a critical thinking course, and certainly is not a composition and critical thinking course. It is a historical methods course with a dash of critical thinking and a smidgeon of composition tossed in,

Response A) No, nearly all critical thinking courses statewide are in Philosophy, English, or Communication.

The aphorism “the exception proves the rule” should guide your thinking here. Of the 658 courses meeting CSU/IGETC critical thinking requirements at the 115 community colleges in California, only 28 (4%) are offered outside ENGL/PHIL/COMM (96%). Outliers shouldn’t determine your decision.

The originators have made much of how there are courses outside of English, Philosophy, and Communication which are taught at other Community Colleges to meet CSU and IGETC critical thinking requirements. That is true, but that argument concludes against, rather than for, approving of HIST B9.

There are 115 Community Colleges in California, and pointing to the 5 which have approved or are attempting to approve History courses for critical thinking and/or composition requirements ignores the 110 which have not and are not considering such approval. The HIST B9 proposal lists one of those Community Colleges which are trying to get a History course approved for critical thinking and composition is Taft College. Bakersfield College should not “aspire” to be Taft College.

There are many possible explanations for why a few other Colleges have approved History courses to meet the critical thinking requirement. Butte College, the other BC, for example, doesn’t have a Philosophy Department, for goodness’ sake. Taft College offers a Communication Studies degree which requires no Communication courses and BC hired away the lone full-time professor that was their entire Communication Studies faculty this Spring.

Another explanation is an extremely permissive Curriculum Committees. Diablo Valley College, for example, is another College listed as having a History course that meets the critical thinking requirement. Yes, but they ALSO allow an Art History course,, a Psychology course, and a Sociology course to meet the requirement. DVC accounts for 4 of the 28 courses statewide which meet the CSU/IGETC critical thinking requirement. Two other community colleges, LA Harbor and LA Pierce are responsible for 4 more of these other courses, including a Computer Literacy course, a Journalism course, a Political Science course, and Psychology course.

Finally, pointing to the few exceptions reinforces the rule: 96% of the 658 course system wide which meet the critical thinking requirement are taught in the English/Philosophy/Communication Departments.

Response B) No, there is no need at BC for a critical thinking course in History.

For Fall 2020, at least a year before this course could be offered, existing courses will be sufficient to meet all student need for both CSU and UC critical thinking courses.

When HIST B9 was proposed last year, there was a real and pressing need to meet student demand for critical thinking courses. The need has been fully and more than fully met for CSU critical thinking. English, Philosophy, and Communication have stepped up and expanded course offerings.

Communication hired 2 full-time instructors in the Spring specifically to teach COMM B5: Argumentation and Debate, expanding the number of sections taught to 20 in the Fall of 2019, a nearly doubling of the number of sections taught in Fall 2018. English had to cancel a couple of sections this Fall because the number of classes met and even exceeded student demand.

The IGETC critical thinking requirement is still impacted, although much less than a year ago. A new course approved last year, COMM B15, meets the IGETC requirement and will be offered beginning Fall 2020. In consultation with the Counseling Department and its Dean, it was concluded that ALL expected IGETC critical thinking demand should be met with 5 additional sections of those courses. Communication will offer 3 or 4 sections of COMM B15 and English will add 1-3 additional sections of English B2 and/or B3.

There is just no need to add another critical thinking or another composition and critical/thinking course at BC.

Response C) No, we should not just let IGETC reviewers decide for us.

The Bakersfield College Curriculum Committee should not “aspire” to be the Taft College Curriculum Committee. IGETC approval is a stochastic process: they inexplicably reject or approve courses. We ought not to hand our responsibility to unknown actors.

We have all heard the rhetoric of how statewide approval functions: it isn’t that they will approve a ham sandwich, but rather that they might approve a ham sandwich or deny a perfectly constructed course. HIST B18 was denied despite our Articulation Officer’s best evaluation of its chances and is now scrambling to win an appeal. Despite what appears to be an AMAZING submission moving forward, no one can guarantee that the course will get approval.

Which reviewers are assigned to review, the limited information that reviews are based on, the workload of the reviewers, and the expectations of the powers that be all influence whether a course will be approved or not. It would be naïve to think that only those courses which it is wise to meet a critical thinking or a critical thinking/composition requirement will be approved.

Only 28 of the 658 courses which meet the critical thinking requirement are taught outside English/Philosophy/ Communication, which is 4%. That is within acceptable error for most social science academic research, so one might think the statewide record is pretty good. Those 28 courses include “Computer Literacy for Liberal Arts Majors,” “Business Communication,” and “Critical Thinking in Visual Studies.” How in the world they got approved is a mystery, likely the result of tired, overworked, or just uncaring statewide reviewers.

It is our responsibility to make wise decisions about what courses we should approve to meet GE requirements and it is not a responsibility to hand over to unknown reviewers.