Curiosity Unfolding: 
Developing Creative Problem Solving and Critical Thinking Skills

“Can you google it?”

This is a common thought process for the millennial generation of college students. USM students follow the trend of those across the United States, and often seek immediate gratification and the “right” answers. Critical thinking and problem solving skills pervade the real world job market, and can and should be ignited in the college classroom as preparation for our graduates’ careers. Even the idea of these proposal submissions ignites brainstorming, critical thinking, and reflection, and demonstrates its application in the USM workforce. Daniel Pink, a free agent and author of A Whole New Mind, investigates why employers might seek individuals with creative approaches to projects. He states “In short, we’ve progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. And now we’re progressing again—to a society of creators and empathizers, of pattern recognizers and meaning makers.” (50). Our instant gratification students stifle their creativity or even the possibility of thinking creatively. Nationally, the amount of college graduates have increased, the job market stays steady, and job seekers must set themselves apart from other candidates. How can USM prepare our students for the job market without fostering creative problem solving and critical thinking in the college classroom?

This proposal asserts that USM students need more experiences in critical thinking and problem solving at every level of study. The initiative includes: 1) expansion of the LEC and Think Center (Hattiesburg and Gulf Park campus), 2) faculty seminar and development workshops that focus on innovative experiences in critical thinking and problem solving and ways to apply this in the classroom, 3) development of cross-curricular experiences, specifically in general education courses, 4) expansion of internship and field experience opportunities for undergraduate students and 5) collection of data from the job market to define needs and what USM students bring to the workplace.

The goal with this QEP initiative is to impact the student learning environment in as many USM classrooms and experiences as possible, and to make it a priority in early course work and application of fieldwork, thus changing the whole student experience. The universities plan to build a climate for student success includes educational programs that adhere to rigorous standards in terms of student advisement, engagement, and mentoring; curriculum development and delivery; and the exploration and generation of scholarly work. The strategies of this QEP initiative for critical thinking and problem solving will cross-over with results in retention, graduation and student success, career preparation, and experiential learning. Thus by focusing on this component, a ripple of effect of benefits will surface for USM students. The priority of this proposal is to:

- To foster critical thinking and problem solving skills across USM’s GEC and degree program curriculum in an effort to deepen student learning and prepare graduates for careers
- To increase the percentage of students who participate in internships, practicum, or field experiences
- To increase student persistence through engaged experiences in USM classrooms
- To increase the marketability of USM graduates