

# Critical Thinking and Diversity Experiences: The Case of An American Pacific Island University

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## Abstract

Critical thinking is an important learning outcome for college students. A review of the literature shows that this skill is affected by a number of factors, including exposure to cultural diversity. The University of Guam (UOG) located in the western Pacific is multicultural and multilingual. Using data from focus groups, this study examined the perceived influence of diversity experiences on critical thinking among UOG students in the College of Professional Studies (Business, Education, and Nursing). The study participants defined critical thinking as the act of independently and systematically weighing evidence to make an evaluation and judgment, to determine merits, and to increase a desirable outcome. Diversity experiences helped the participants to develop sensitivity and awareness of self. The findings of this study confirm the results of prior studies on diversity and critical thinking. Educational importance of the findings was discussed in detail.

**Key words:** critical thinking, diversity experience, critical academic skills, focus group studies

## Introduction

One of the most important aims of education, especially at the college level, is to foster students' ability to *think critically*, to reason, and to use judgment effectively in decision-making (McMILLAN 1987). Guiding students toward becoming *critical thinkers* has always been a primary goal of the university experience (GWARTNEY 2003); however, "Is critical thinking a way to think about subject matter, or is it a way of thinking about thinking? Is it a kind of knowledge or a skill or habit?" (p. 22). There is no agreed upon definition of critical thinking and many different instruments are used for its assessment (RYKIEL 2000). In management courses, "critical thinking skills are to do research, analyze data, critically evaluate the results, and present the findings in a well-argued paper or well-crafted presentation" (MALEKZADEH 1998, p. 590). "Critical academic skills are measures of student performance.... Critical thinking skills, speech, writing, reading, group interaction, and quantitative reasoning skills have many overlapping components" (LARSON and WISSMA 2000, p. 43). Critical thinking is an important learning outcome for college students, even though it seems that they are encouraged to learn or memorize what is written in textbooks.

*Diversity* is a characteristic of American higher learning; in fact, "one of the strengths of American higher education is its remarkable diversity" (RYKIEL 2000, p. 47). The profile of the student body in American higher education has drastically changed (MARCY 2004). Over the past three decades, people have witnessed the entrance of women

