Abstract – Sheldon Helms

For the Fall semester of 2013, I plan to undertake the research portion of my doctoral dissertation. As of the writing of this portion of my application, the details of my research have not yet been decided. However, the thesis will be teaching critical thinking (reflective reasoning about beliefs and actions) in the field of psychology. I plan to use the Psychological Critical Thinking Exam (PCTE), a standardized paper-and-pencil measure of critical thinking, to gauge students’ skills before and after successful completion of a psychology course at Ohlone College. This will provide me (and my colleagues) with data to judge our level of success in teaching critical thinking skills to our students.

Based upon published reports in psychology, I will use a truncated version of Lawson's (1999) Psychological Critical Thinking Exam (PCTE) to assess students' critical thinking in every psychology course taught at Ohlone College in the Fall 2013 semester. The PCTE is a 14-item test that presents information about different scenarios along with an interpretation of the meaning of those scenarios and the relationships between the variables described in each. For example, one item describes how a florist played a subliminal tape for her employees and after two days, her employees started making creative floral arrangements out of materials in a scrap box. The presented interpretation is that the music caused an increase in creativity. Participants are then asked to explain whether there are any problems with that interpretation, and if so, to explain the problem (i.e., they are asked to methodologically critique the "experiment.").

This sort of critical thinking is an extremely important part of any student's education, and a critical part of the Student Learning Objectives for the psychology department at Ohlone College. The ability to think critically allows us to use rationality when considering whether or not claims are true.

My hope is that I can use what I learn from this survey of our students' skills to show me where our department can improve its attempts to teach this important skill.