Critical thinking 101 By Matt Gallman Special to The Sun, November 4, 2012.

Many years ago I was preparing for a faculty meeting, where I was going to try to convince colleagues that we should start a program in Service Learning. The stress must have gotten to me, because I had a dream about a faculty meeting.

In this dream one colleague announced that she had students who had taken Service Learning courses and they reported that they "hadn't learned anything." I responded that "it is my job to teach them, not to tell them when they are learning." I woke up feeling proud of this rebuttal, and a bit discouraged that I am apparently most clever when I am not awake. I recall this dream because it seems that UF College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is under siege. Our enrollments are dropping, and our budgets are being slashed. Courses that have filled year after year are now running in rooms with empty seats. No doubt there are many forces coming together to create this situation. In times of economic uncertainty, prospective undergraduates turn in other directions. Degrees that appear to translate most directly into jobs have inherent advantages. Surely part of that is rational market-driven thinking. And perhaps departments in CLAS must shift their product to appeal to a shifting market.

But I think that part of the problem is that our prospective consumers do not fully understand what we are selling. I am an American historian. My sense is that most high school seniors and their parents think of the discipline of history as the study of stuff that happened in the past. It involves dates and elections and battles and things that some folks might find interesting, others might find boring, but few find "useful." My guess is that our state Legislature and governor have similar ideas, and I fear that our Board of Trustees does not have a very different notion of what goes on in history courses. It is not unreasonable to assume that history courses are about, well, history. Perhaps it is time for members of CLAS to be more clear — and more aggressive — in explaining what students are actually learning in our classes.

Students in CLAS learn intellectual skills that serve them in all sorts of careers. They learn to do research, examine primary sources, construct arguments, express themselves in writing and orally. In the jargon of the profession, we teach "critical thinking." And those skills translate into nearly all professions.

These are fine arguments, but they are perhaps too abstract. Let me illustrate the point using some concrete examples from the most recent meeting of my course on the American Civil War. When I teach about the Civil War I am interested in students thinking about historic processes. I do not care much if they do not recall individual dates or historic actors five years later. Mostly I want them to think about how history works. How change happens. How events unfold. How seemingly unconnected people and things interact. In my most recent class on Antietam and emancipation we touched on many topics: The debate over who freed the slaves. What roles did Abraham Lincoln, radical abolitionists, Union soldiers and anonymous slaves have in changing history? Lincoln's use of different sorts of words and arguments in several documents. How does the audience and context shape rhetoric? Robert E. Lee's decision to invade the North in the fall of 1862. How did he weigh strategy, politics, international concerns, morale, access to food and human hubris? Our discussion of the battle considered matters of leadership, contingency, changing technology and bizarre coincidence. We looked at a series of photographs of the dead at Antietam and considered how vivid images shape our understanding of events. Later we viewed photographic portraits of black soldiers and contemplated what those images must have meant to them and those around them. We discussed the Emancipation Proclamation and how it must be understood within the constitutional constraints of the presidency. This led to a series of topics on the recruitment of black soldiers. How did recruiters employ the language of manhood to recruit black men?

All of the specifics in this class unfolded in less than two years, but I would like to think that in addition to the "history stuff" the class addressed much broader concerns. This is, I believe, what happens all over CLAS. We teach specifics while building larger interpretive skills. I used to be content to do my teaching without worrying too much about explaining to folks what I thought they were learning.

After all, all our classes filled with learners.

But now I think it does matter. So we need to start making that point more clearly. And our leaders need to start listening to what we actually do rather than what they think we do.

Matt Gallman is a professor of history at the University of Florida.

(http://www.gainesville.com/article/20121104/OPINION03/120139999?template=printart)