Philosophy faculty write new critical thinking textbook
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When George Rainbolt and Sandra Dwyer of the Department of Philosophy started to write a new textbook, they began with their own students’ needs – and ended up with four presses bidding to publish the result. Critical Thinking in College will be put out by Thomson Wadsworth in the fall of 2008. In the meantime, the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State is teaching out of custom-printed editions and gathering student responses. “I’m actually making tons of changes in response to feedback,” Rainbolt said. The book is designed to solve a problem the Department of Philosophy has been puzzling over for some time. Enrollment in one of the department’s core courses, Philosophy 2010: Great Questions of Philosophy, had been falling for some time. “While the credit hours were going down, the teaching evaluations, if anything, were going up,” said Rainbolt, who is department chair. So why were fewer students enrolling in a course that was arguably more successful than ever? The department examined evaluation data from several different angles, Rainbolt said, but couldn’t come up with a definitive answer. Finally, they asked the undergraduate majors what they thought. “The answer was obvious to them,” Rainbolt said. “Philosophy 1010 was such a bad course that nobody who takes it wants to take Philosophy 2010.” Specifically, the students said, they hated the textbook. “Looking at it, we agreed with the students,” Rainbolt said. The book is dry and technical, he said, and focused narrowly on philosophy. In other words, it was not appropriate for an introductory course that included students with a wide range of interest. The department began to search for another book, but ran into another roadblock. Most new critical thinking texts centered on non-academic skills like how to understand newspaper articles and politicians’ speeches. They did not cover the specific skills students needed to do well in college. Rainbolt and Dwyer decided to write their own textbook. They knew the project would be incredibly time-consuming, but “it was good for the department and good for the students,” Rainbolt said. The result was Critical Thinking in College. The book has chapters on uses of language, logic, moral arguments, and statistical arguments, among others. At the end, an appendix contains short sections on critical thinking in different disciplines ranging from anthropology to physics. Once they had written the text, Rainbolt and Dwyer decided to contact publishers to see if any would be interested. The critical thinking market is a tight one, the authors found, but their book filled a niche – it was neither overly technical nor overly general. With a manuscript and a contract in hand, the department decided it was time to use the book in the classroom. Rainbolt taught from his new text this spring, and it will become the standard for Philosophy 1010 starting in the second summer session. “We’re trying to prepare students for the materials they’re going to see in future classes,” Rainbolt said. “I think the overall response has been positive.”