

May 26, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Professor Jeffrey Ford
Associate Dean for Curriculum, CLASS

FROM: Louis Barbato
Chair, Department of English

SUBJECT: 2006 Assessment Report

**ASSESSMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
FOR THE MAJOR FIELD OF ENGLISH**

I. GOALS

The goals for candidates for the B.A. in English were modified at the time the curriculum was revamped to accommodate the university's shift from a quarter to a semester calendar. Following a trial period, these goals were revised by department vote on March 21, 2003.

In all curriculum matters for the undergraduate major, recommendations originate in the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies, chaired by the Director of Undergraduate Studies, then forwarded to the Committee on Instruction [COI -- the department's curriculum committee]. COI is responsible for setting the agenda for department meetings and placing committee recommendations on the agenda. All curriculum matters must be approved by department vote.

As one of the largest undergraduate programs in the liberal arts, the English major is pursued by students with a variety of career goals. Some are preparing for teaching at the secondary level; some intend to pursue further study and careers in management and law; some look toward careers in publishing; some aspire to successful careers as writers; and some intend to pursue graduate study in language and literature.

The principal goals of the program are to provide its graduates with

1. A sound liberal arts education as a foundation for success in a variety of careers and professions;
2. A high level of competence in the written and spoken language;
3. Excellent analytical and problem solving abilities;
4. An understanding of basic methods of research and of the effective and ethical use of different kinds of evidence in constructing an argument.

II. OUTCOMES

The Department undertakes to assess the effectiveness of its program in fulfilling the expectations and in meeting the objectives of students who enroll, in preparing them for advanced study or entrance into the careers they have chosen, and in preparing them to succeed in their chosen course after graduation.

Graduates will be able to

1. Write clear, organized, and effective prose;
2. Clearly formulate a problem or question and develop a coherent and effective strategy for addressing it;
3. Analyze texts in a manner that reflects a clear understanding of them and an understanding of how language works;
4. Demonstrate an ability to find relevant evidence and to properly employ it in constructing an argument or position;
5. Express themselves effectively in oral presentations and discussions.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

- a. All English majors are required to enroll in a Senior Seminar [capstone course] during their senior year in the program. Enrollment in these courses is limited to twenty students. The seminar entails the completion of an individual research project, the production of a research paper, and an oral summary presentation of the thesis followed by a discussion of it in the seminar. The project is assessed on the basis of the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of the writing, the coherence of the thesis, and the ability to make correct, effective, and ethical use of research resources and sources.

- b. Instructors in Senior Seminars prepare an evaluation of the overall performance of participants in the seminar (usually a one-page narrative). In addition, they submit evaluation forms for each student assessing his/her performance in the five defined areas of outcomes assessment. These evaluations include an assessment of whether the student has exceeded expectations, met expectations, or performed below expectations in each of the areas. In addition, instructors identify specific areas of deficiency under each of the five areas. (These student evaluation forms are included as “**Appendix A.**”)
- c. The general evaluations, along with the individual student evaluations, are submitted to the coordinator of undergraduate assessment for tabulation, and then forwarded to the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English along with the tabulations.
- d. Instructors in Senior Seminars also submit copies of three of the research projects completed in the course to the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English. The selection should include a project the instructor evaluated as “exceeding expectations,” a project judged as “meeting expectations,” and a project judged as “falling below expectations.” In the event that the instructor did not consider any submission to “exceed expectations,” or to “fall below expectations,” the instructor submits what she/he judged to be the strongest and weakest projects.
- e. The Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies in English conducts a blind reading of the submitted student projects and evaluates them using the Senior Seminar evaluation form. The committee then reviews the reports from the seminar instructors, and reports significant indications of weaknesses in the program, along with recommendations for curricular revisions, to the Committee on Instruction.
- g. At the first meeting of the department each fall semester, the Director of Undergraduate Studies presents the results of these assessment activities along with his/her identification of weaknesses in the major program and recommendations for program modifications.

APPENDIX A: Senior Seminar Evaluation Form

Student: _____ Instructor: _____ Semester: _____

Senior Seminar Assessment

For each of the following assessment outcomes indicate whether the student's performance
1 – Exceeded expectations 2 – Met Expectations 3 – Was below expectations

In addition, under each assessment outcome, put a checkmark beside each rubric that describes a criterion that the student's performance **did not** meet.

_____ **A. Writes clear, organized and effective prose:**

- ___ a) Demonstrates a mastery of the grammar and conventions of standard written English.
- ___ b) Effectively uses a variety of sentence structures.
- ___ c) Establishes an appropriate authorial voice and level of formality.
- ___ d) Demonstrates a mastery of stylistic conventions of manuscript preparation.

_____ **B. Clearly formulates a problem or question and develops a coherent and effective strategy for addressing it:**

- ___ a) Provides an introduction that identifies the problem or question to be addressed and indicates the structure of the following analysis.
- ___ b) Provides clear and effective transitions marking stages in the development of the argument.
- ___ c) Develops and effectively supports a clear, unifying thesis.

_____ **C. Analyzes texts in a manner that reflects a clear understanding of them, and an understanding of how language works.**

- ___ a) Clearly recognizes the difference between literal and figurative expression.
- ___ b) Demonstrates a capability of describing features of linguistic constructions accurately and concretely.
- ___ c) Clearly distinguishes between description, interpretation, and appreciation in dealing with literary texts.

_____ **D. Demonstrates skills in research and the use of sources.**

- ___ a) Demonstrates familiarity with print and electronic reference resources.
- ___ b) Selects appropriate and varied sources.
- ___ c) Demonstrates an understanding of the sources and an ability to relate them to the student's own argument.
- ___ d) Clearly distinguishes between opinions/interpretations derived from sources and the student's own opinions/interpretations.
- ___ e) Makes effective use of paraphrase and restricts direct quotation to instances in which it's needed.
- ___ f) Effectively incorporates quotations into the student's own syntax.

_____ **E. Expresses him/herself effectively in oral presentations and discussions:**

- ___ a) Delivers a report in a clear, articulate fashion finding an appropriate balance between rambling informality and the reading of a prepared text.
- ___ b) Provides a clear overview of the subject being reported on making intelligent selections of the material to be presented.
- ___ c) Suggests foci for following discussions.
- ___ d) Responds effectively to questions and challenges.

FINDINGS:

In general the assessment has been encouraging, with improvement noted in several areas since the establishment of revised outcomes in 2003. Definite improvement has been registered in students' ability to formulate a thesis, to organize a progressive essay, and to use secondary sources with greater relevance and authority. The greater effort now being expended on the use of sources by instructors in 300-level courses is obviously paying off. Subcommittee members who also had participated in the assessment process in the previous year noted particularly the improvement in the use of secondary source material.

Along with the encouraging signs of improvement, however, the assessment process has continued to uncover areas which need greater concerted effort, especially among our weaker students. The report of the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies [May 5, 2006] concludes that

...we need to pay more attention to the problems posed by our weakest students. Our best students are very well prepared; our average students work at a level that enables them to succeed if they are willing to work hard...but two of the instructors had one or two students in their classes who simply were not prepared for a senior seminar and thus were not capable of succeeding even with hard work.

The challenges to the department recognized by the subcommittee may be summarized in the following manner:

1) Make certain that the Senior Seminar is truly a “capstone course,” i.e., one that is taken at the end of the program of studies. This means that the course prerequisite for “senior standing” must be strictly adhered to. Moreover, major advisors should counsel students to have completed most of their 300-level coursework before embarking on the rigor of the senior seminar.

ACTION: The department has instituted a new rule that a student must have either senior standing or receive special permission to enroll in a senior seminar. Students with fewer than fifteen hours of upper-level course work in the major will be advised to delay their enrollment for one semester.

2) Some students revealed difficulty in distinguishing between paraphrase and analysis or argument, in integrating paraphrase and quotation smoothly into texts, or in constructing tight, unified arguments.

ACTION: As a result of these findings, the results of a “mini-review” of sections of ENGLISH 241, and the recommendations of Task Force on Freshman English, the department has decided to begin at the beginning with a revision of the syllabus and writing assignments for ENG 101-102. This sequence will concentrate on argument, analysis, and the use of evidence. The initial essay assignment for all sections of ENG 101 is now to write a paraphrase of a significant, college level essay.

REVIEW:

The method through which the Department of English reviews its curriculum is discussed above under the section on **GOALS**. Recommendations originate with the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies and are forwarded to the Committee on Instruction, which is responsible for bringing the recommendations to the department. The department must approve any substantive curricular changes. The subcommittee makes a preliminary report on its review findings at the last department meeting in the spring term and its recommendations for change through the COI at the first department meeting in fall term.

The full report of the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies for 2006 is included at the end of the report.

**ASSESSMENT OF GRADUATE STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
FOR THE MAJOR FIELD OF ENGLISH**

The M.F.A. program in English, a consortial arrangement with Kent State University, the University of Akron, and Youngstown State University, admitted its first full class in fall 2005. Next year's assessment review will include the first completed theses in this program.

GOALS:

Upon the recommendation of the Graduate Subcommittee and approval by the entire department, four goals for the M. A. program in English were established in 1999.

Students will demonstrate

Goal A: skills to interpret texts of all kinds and to defend their interpretations effectively,

Goal B: excellent facility in written and spoken language,

Goal C: thorough awareness of at least one particular field within the study of writing, literature, critical theory, cultural studies, linguistics, or pedagogy, and

Goal D: the capacity to produce scholarly, critical, or creative work in the genres and of quality that could lead to publication in reputable venues.

OUTCOMES:

In 2003, upon the recommendation of the Graduate Subcommittee, the department adopted two sets of outcomes for students in the M.A. program – six for those on the literature track and five for those on the creative writing track (see below). The grade of “A” means “Exceeds Expectations”; “B,” “Meets Expectations”; “C,” Falls below expectations”; “D,” “Not applicable.”

Literature:

- a) Demonstrates the ability to interpret texts and to defend these interpretations effectively.
- b) Demonstrates the ability to focus on and define a problem; work on this problem must have the potential to advance scholarly or pedagogical work in the field.
- c) Demonstrates the ability to synthesize an approach to the problem by drawing on the significant relevant scholarship in the field.

- d) Renders his/her analysis in compelling prose, and in a form suitable for publication in reputable venues. The writing ought to be as clear as the nature of the subject will permit.
- e) Situates his/her findings within current scholarly or critical debate on this topic; the student should be able to do so both orally and in his or her written work.
- f) Demonstrates awareness of the limits of his or her claims or analytic approach.

Creative Writing:

- a) Demonstrates the ability to revise.
- b) Demonstrates progress toward producing publishable creative work.
- c) Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of a range of literary journals and magazines.
- d) Demonstrates knowledge of and an ability to speak of the literary tradition of her/his particular genre, including contemporary work, and where she/he fits in.
- e) Demonstrates technical mastery of various elements of genres.

RESEARCH METHODS:

Also in 2003, the department implemented a two-method official assessment procedure.

Method A. Evaluation of English M.A. Recipient's Thesis and Master's Examination
Literature Track

Student's Name:

First Reader:

Second Reader:

Third Reader:

For each of the following Outcomes Assessment Goals, please indicate whether the student's performance

A) Exceeded Expectations B) Met Expectations C) Fell below Expectations

Written component

_____ a) Demonstrates the ability to interpret texts and to defend these interpretations effectively.

_____ b) Demonstrates the ability to focus on and define a problem.

_____ c) Demonstrates the ability to synthesize an approach to the problem by drawing on the significant relevant scholarship in the field.

_____ d) Renders his/her analysis in compelling prose. The writing ought to be as clear as the nature of the subject will permit.

_____ e) Situates his/her findings within current scholarly or critical debate on this topic in the written work; the student should be able to do so both orally and in his or her written work.

_____ f) Demonstrates awareness of the limits of his or her claims or analytic approach.

How close is the written work to publication? 1-10 scale

_____ Does this work have the potential to advance scholarly or pedagogical work in the field.

_____ Prose is a level appropriate for publication

Oral component:

_____ a) Gives a lucid, organized presentation of the project

_____ b) Situates his/her findings within current scholarly or critical debate on this topic in the written work; the student should be able to do so both orally and in his or her written work.

_____ c) Demonstrates awareness of the limits of his or her claims or analytic approach.

_____ d) Handles questions professionally.

Effect of Prospectus:

Did student complete a prospectus (ask the student)? _____ (Y/N)

Did student feel this task was helpful (ask the student)? _____ (Y/N)

Evaluation of English M.A. Recipient's Thesis and Master's Examination
Creative Writing Track [revised for 2006]

Student's Name:

First Reader:

Second Reader:

Third Reader:

For each of the following Outcomes Assessment Goals, please indicate whether the student's performance:

A) Exceeded Expectations B) Met Expectations C) Fell below Expectations

Written component

_____ a) Analytical section shows a clear sense of the genre(s) the student is working in, their history, and their conventions, and in what ways the student is attempting to emulate or rework such conventions.

_____ b) Analytical section demonstrates a knowledge of appropriate criticism about the genre the student is working in.

_____ c) Creative Prose is appropriate for a graduating M.A. or MFA student.

How close is the written work to publication? 1-10 scale:

_____ Prose is a level appropriate for publication

Oral component:

_____ a) Gives a lucid, organized presentation of the project.

_____ b) Situates his/her findings appropriately (per a/b above).

_____ c) Handles questions professionally.

Effect of Revisions: (1st and 2nd reader):

_____ a) Revised work effectively.

Method B. Periodic Review of Students' Written Work

Having conducted a complete review of five prior years in the 2003-05 assessment, the members of the Graduate Subcommittee this year decided to read 8 theses from the calendar year 2004, each thesis being evaluated by two people. In future, each assessment circuit, completed in spring, will reflect theses defended in the previous calendar year (spring, summer, fall), so that next year's review will be conducted for theses completed in calendar 2006.

Observations

Literature Theses

Out of the 8 theses assessed this year, 5 were in literature (5/8 roughly represented the overall ratio of creative to literary theses). In this year's sample, all but one thesis met or exceeded expectations for outcomes A, B, C, and D; in each case, only one of two assessors felt that the student had not met expectations for those outcomes. *We therefore feel that students in our program generally seem adequately trained in textual interpretation, approaching a problem, synthesizing scholarship, and writing in compelling prose.*

Students were not quite as successful in meeting the last two categories, E and F. In three out of five theses, at least one of two assessors was not satisfied with how well a student situated his or her findings within current debate. In four out of five theses, one out of two assessors was not satisfied with how well the student demonstrated awareness of the limits of his or her claims or analytic approach. *One of our actions will be to modify the tips and pointers handout to encourage students to include more information about this in their written thesis and oral defense.*

The graduate director has now received some very well focused prospectuses. One of our actions will be to modify our assessment rubric to judge quantitatively whether the prospectus is helping.

Creative Writing Theses

Of the three creative theses assessed this year, all were found satisfactory in category B (demonstrating progress towards producing publishable work) and category E (technical mastery of various elements of genre). Thus we believe that our students are learning to produce good quality works of creative writing. More than one assessor pointed out that it was impossible for the ex-post-factor assessors to address knowingly category A (ability to revise), since the assessor is only judging the final draft. Reviewing these assessment items will therefore be on the agenda of the Graduate Subcommittee.

As was the case in the last assessment process, it was again the case that most assessors found that a significant number of theses (here three out of three) did not meet expectations for category C (knowledge and understanding of a range of journals) or category D (knowledge and ability to discuss the traditions and genres within which the student is working). We note for the record that in assessing calendar year 2004, our committee was necessarily reviewing many theses that had been written and defended before the recommendations made in a memo to the department last year had been circulated. We do feel, however, that there still needs to be a clearer departmental understanding of the expectations for the analytical section expected in creative theses, as we spell out in the Recommendations section below.

Recommendations and Actions

Literature theses – The Graduate Subcommittee is continuing to distribute the instructional handout devised in response to last year’s assessment rubric (with tips and pointers for reviewing scholarly material and shaping a thesis argument) to all ENG 510 and ENG 511 sections. Since the cycle of students receiving this handout early in their career will have increased by next year, we hope to see further improvement in categories E & F described above. We will be modifying this handout this year to touch on the “awareness of approach” issue mentioned above.

Literature Assessment Rubric - The Graduate Subcommittee has just revised its assessment rubric so that the questions fit more logically into the two assessment moments: 1) right after the defense (with comments about the oral portions of the exam); 2) annual evaluation of sample theses (comments only on written product). The new rubric will also attempt to determine the effect of the new prospectus requirement.

Creative Writing theses – The memo sent last year seems to have improved the analytical section in the creative writing theses. Only one thesis lacked such a section, and this was a thesis started before the stipulations of the memo took effect. We hope for 100% compliance by next year

Creative Writing Assessment Rubric – The Graduate Subcommittee has just revised its assessment rubric to include separate comments about the revising process and the final result. We also have a new section on the analytical section.

Future Research and possible future Actions:

Following the comments from the outside consultant during program review (as well as anecdotal evidence from graduate faculty that some students are clearly struggling to complete a thesis), we will be looking into alternative degree completion options for students in the literature track only.

Following a graduate subcommittee meeting on May 9, 2006, our plans include:

Gary Dyer will report to the committee in fall 2006 with a plan for an M.A. marketing plan to target the department’s strengths: i.e. an M.A. focused on Literature, Culture, and History.

One of the graduate assistants will be assigned to investigate MAT program offerings around the country

Mary Murray will be asked to join the graduate subcommittee as a representative from the rhetoric/composition field, and we will request that Ted Lardner report to us about a proposal he once submitted to COI for a M.A. track in Literature, Writing, and Pedagogy.

This track was not originally approved by COI, but we will look into making that approval more feasible.

New Dual-Degree Program

The graduate committee has just approved a new plan for a dual-degree program with Chung-Ang University in Korea. This action was not prompted by any previous departmental assessment reports, but was instigated at the behest of the Dean of CLASS and the Dean of Graduate Studies, following the dual degree programs available in the College of Urban Affairs and CAU.

As part of the Department of English Program Review, Professor Emeritus Earl Anderson conducted a survey of baccalaureate and masters alumni, going back to the late sixties. The data and discursive comments in this report may hold some interest for those involved in the university's assessment process. A hard copy has been sent to Associate Dean Ford. Additional copies will be made available to the committee upon request.

To: Louis Barbato, Chair, Department of English
From: David Larson, Director, Undergraduate Studies
Re: **Assessment of Senior Seminars—2006**
Date: May 5, 2006

The four members of the English Department's Subcommittee on Undergraduate Literature read a total of eighteen senior seminar papers from three different senior seminars. Each paper was read by two members of the committee. As usual we rated them as: 1) above expectations, 2) meeting expectations, or 3) below expectations.

There was more consistency in the ratings assigned by the evaluators and the instructors of the seminars this year than last. Unlike last year, there were no three-way splits—i.e. no paper received all three ratings. The few two-way splits (one reader rating a paper as a 1 and another assigning it a 2 or one assigning a paper a 2 while another rated it a 3) were fully understandable. Usually the splits occurred on a paper that was strong in some respects but significantly weaker in others, and the readers disagreed

as to which aspects of the paper were more important. Importantly, the readers and the instructors were clearly in general agreement as to the characteristics of a strong paper, though there was some disagreement as to their relative importance.

The central strengths the readers saw in the papers were improved theses, improved organization, and improved use of secondary source material. The two readers who served on the assessment committee last year were especially struck by the improvement in the use of secondary source material. Our reminders to instructors of 300 level courses that they must continue to work on this seem to be having some effect.

There were, however, also weaknesses in the papers—especially among the less than outstanding papers—that our 300 level courses need to keep working on.

Our weaker students have problems with writing coherent English prose and with such basic skills as writing coherent paraphrases and distinguishing between paraphrase and argument. There were some students in at least two of the seminars who simply were not, in the opinion of both the instructors and assessment evaluators, ready for a senior seminar, and there was some question as to how they reached this point in our program. This problem may in part be a consequence of allowing students with junior status to sign up for the senior seminar. A few students have taken the senior seminar after having completed only one or two 300 level courses. The Department has instituted a new rule that a student must either have senior standing or must receive special permission to enroll in a senior seminar, and this may help solve this issue. But it is also possible that we need to be more rigorous in making sure that students who do not have the basic skills required of English majors do not receive passing grades in our 300 level courses.

At a higher level some of the papers assessed needed to use a wider variety of sources and to work on integrating paraphrase and quotation more smoothly into the texts. And there was also, rather surprisingly, a sense among the assessors that these students were less strong at close reading of texts than they should be—something two of the seminar instructors also noted. This may be a fluke, the consequence of the particular topics on which the students were writing or a characteristic of one batch of students. But it bears watching to see in the same issue emerges next year.

As far as the instructors' evaluations of their seminar students were concerned, there was quite a wide range of opinion. One instructor found his students were significantly stronger than in the previous senior seminar he taught, especially in their research skills and writing proficiency, though he noted that it was hard to make these students stick to the texts they were supposed to be discussing because they had a tendency to want to make

global pronouncements about things. He opined that that might have been a reflection of the students' responses to the topic of the seminar. A second instructor found that her experience was much the same as in teaching previous senior seminars, though she expressed her disappointment with the inability of some of her students to deal effectively with literary language, something she thought might have been a consequence of the fact that most of her students chose to write on politically orientated topics rather than on narrowly literary ones. The third instructor, while pleased with his students' analytical abilities and insights, expressed disappointment with the inability of most of them to construct tight, unified arguments and with the inability of some of them to write precise, clear, idiomatic prose. So three different instructors found rather different strengths and weakness in their students.

Overall, this assessment suggests that we need to pay more attention to the problems posed by our weakest students. We need try to find ways to work more effectively with them, and we probably need to be more rigorous in assessing our weaker students' 200 and 300 level work. Our best students are very well prepared; our average students work at a level that enables them to succeed if they are willing to work hard –though two instructors noted that some of these students were, unfortunately, not willing to work as hard as they needed to in order to succeed. But two of the instructors had one or two students in their classes who simply were not prepared for a senior seminar and thus were not capable of succeeding even with hard work.