

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH ASSESSMENT REPORT 2011

Scholarship & Diversity in the Undergraduate English Major

CONTEXT

The English Department's plan for assessing scholarship—one of the 7 Student Learning Outcomes identified in the Habits of Inquiry and Reflection Report and integrated into the University's new assessment plan—in the undergraduate major was re-created from scratch in fall 2008, and was implemented to the extent possible (given existing and new data-collection practices) in spring 2009. In fall 2009 and spring 2010, the Department drafted and then significantly revised and condensed an additional set of learning outcomes and measures for assessing diversity, the other HIR outcome we identified as crucial to our undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy. We carried out assessment for both scholarship and diversity outcomes in spring 2010.

Results from both the 2009 and 2010 assessment indicated that graduates appear to be exceeding our articulated goals for both writing researched arguments appropriate to the discipline (outcome 1) and recognizing that attention to social and cultural diversity is central to the field (outcome 4). The two areas in which we have fallen short in both years are in engaging multiple critical methods (outcome 2) and identifying the sub-fields that comprise the discipline (outcome 3). We have continued to debate and reflect upon where and how we might expect students to engage multiple methods or theories, and determined, in fall 2010, that looking at multiple writing samples from the required theory course(s) would be most effective, since students themselves claim, in one measure, that they are conversant with multiple theories and methods. We have not yet figured out how and where best to convey to students the relationship among the sub-fields of English in our current curriculum, and the University's institutional researcher, Elise Bernal, has recommended that we not assess this outcome again until we have revised our curriculum. At this point, we want to build a curricular structure for this disciplinary diversity (through multiple tracks and options) but we do not think that we will want to assess for this. It was therefore excluded from the 2011 assessment process and from this report.

In AY 2010-11, we began an overhaul of the English major curriculum and seized the opportunity to revisit our learning outcomes in light of our own on-going conversations, the state of the field, and the new Common Academic Program, which relates to majors as well as general education. After agreeing that we would develop three separate tracks (in literature, writing, and teaching), we set out to draft a new set of common learning outcomes that will apply across all three tracks. These new outcomes, formally approved by the Department in December 2010, share some commonalities with the existing assessment plan, but there are also some significant revisions.

Outcomes for the new Major:

<i>ENGLISH MAJORS EXCEL IN...</i>	Students graduating with the English major will have demonstrated the ability to:
READING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply close, critical, and contextual reading skills to texts representing a variety of forms, genres, and national and cultural traditions;
WRITING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • produce rhetorically effective texts in a variety of academic, creative, and/or professional genres;

HISTORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> engage critically with some of the larger historical conversations, debates, and/or traditions in one or more of the fields that constitute the discipline;
RESEARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> employ a scholarly, multi-stage process of inquiry and research to develop and strengthen their own written arguments engaging larger conversations in the discipline;
DIVERSITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify and critique the ways social and cultural differences are constructed and contested by texts representing multiple cultures and traditions.

These five new outcomes will not be assessed until the new major is fully implemented, and, at that time, we will need to identify multiple measures for each and a schedule for how often each outcome will be assessed.

2011 ASSESSMENT IMPLEMENTATION

For 2011, we applied a modified version of the existing plan, omitting the outcome related to diversity of fields in the discipline (formerly outcome 3: "Students will recognize that English is a multi-faceted discipline including rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and literary studies").

The three learning outcomes assessed for graduating English majors are that they will:

1. be able to produce their own scholarly arguments appropriate to the discipline;
2. understand and be able to apply multiple critical and/or theoretical approaches to their analysis of texts;
3. recognize that the study of texts representative of cultural and social diversity is central to the discipline of English.

The four tools used to measure achievement of these learning outcomes were:

1. an anonymous on-line survey of graduating English majors. We collected data from 20 respondents in April; 2 of the completed surveys were disqualified because the answers clearly revealed the students were not graduating seniors (the survey was sent to the entire class, asking 2011 graduates to respond). That left us with 18 valid surveys, signifying an excellent response rate of 69%.
2. a random sample of papers from the 2010-11 capstone seminars (ENG 490). Total enrollment in the 4 sections offered (2 in fall and 2 in spring semester) was 35 students (some of these students must have graduated in December and/or have taken an additional 490 class as an elective, since we had only 26 known graduates in May and August). The papers were not "randomly selected," as we had intended; rather, we reviewed all papers we were able to

collect. Two of the four faculty never submitted sample papers and one submitted fewer than requested. Thus, we had 8 papers from one spring class (its entire enrollment) and 2 from a fall class (representing about 25% of the class). Thus, 10 papers by different students were collected, representing 29% of total enrollment, and they were reviewed by the chair of the Assessment Committee and one other faculty member, with the aid of a common rubric. In cases where the two reviewer's evaluations differed substantially, the department chair performed a third review.

3. a random sample of papers from the theory courses offered in 2010-11: Neither ENG 476 (Composition Theory) nor ENG 489 (Rhetorical Criticism) was offered in 2010-11, so only ENG 488 papers were reviewed. Although the course was offered both semesters (by the same instructor), with a combined total of 35 students, only work from the spring semester class of 20 students was available for review. A random sample of 4 portfolios, each of which included a variety of assigned informal writing as well as a major paper, was reviewed. These portfolios, representing 25% of the spring enrollment and 11% of total 2010-11 enrollment, were reviewed by the chair of the Assessment Committee and one other faculty member, with the aid of a common rubric. In cases where the two reviewer's evaluations differed substantially, the department chair performed a third review.
4. exit interviews with graduating seniors. All graduating seniors were requested to schedule exit interviews with the department chair during the last week of classes and the week of final examinations. Because of scheduling difficulties, we were ultimately able to interview only 4 students, representing 15% of the graduating class. This is a smaller sample than we would like, and we will attempt to increase our yield next year by contacting students earlier in the term to schedule interviews in March.

RESULTS

Outcome 1: Graduating English majors will be able to produce their own scholarly arguments appropriate to the discipline.

Measures:

- A. In an anonymous survey of graduating English majors, 90% of respondents will agree that they write papers for the English major in which they presented their own argument or interpretation about a topic, issue, or text and supported it with scholarly sources from their research. **RESULT = 100%**
- B. 90% of the ENG 490 papers analyzed will present scholarly arguments appropriate to the discipline. **RESULT = 70%**

All 10 papers (100%) scored either "strong" or "adequate" on most criteria. The vast majority (90%) used up-to-date scholarly sources that were relevant to the topic. There was a single criterion in which student papers were significantly weaker, dropping them below our 90% overall goal: only 70% used an identifiable and appropriate documentation style. The three inadequate papers did document sources in some way, but they were highly inconsistent or inaccurate in form. This year's review shows a significant improvement (14%) in this area, but we still fall below our goal. Failure effectively to use MLA or another

appropriate documentation style in the major paper for the capstone is a concern. We have begun discussing where best to map this skill into the revised curriculum.

Outcome 2: Graduating English majors will understand and be able to apply multiple critical and/or theoretical approaches to their analysis of texts.

Measures:

- A. In an anonymous survey of graduating English majors, 90% of respondents will “agree” or “strongly agree” that they understand 3 or more theoretical or critical approaches from a list of options. **RESULT = 94%.**

17 respondents identified at least three theories or critical approaches that they would “feel prepared to explain or discuss.” Many students identified a good deal more than 3. The most commonly identified theories were narrative theory (by 73.7%) , writing process theory, New Criticism, feminist theory (each by 57.9%), and reader-response theory (52.6%).

In addition, 80% will be able to identify 2 or more approaches from the list that they employed in their own analysis of texts. **RESULT = 37%.** Only 7 respondents (37%) were able to identify at least two theoretical or critical approaches that they had employed in their own writing for English courses. The low response rate may be in part because the short-answer question was optional. We will require it next year, and allow a “n/a” response. Nevertheless, the low rate merits some concern.

- B. In a random sample of papers from ENG 476, 488, and 489, 90% of students will employ two or more identifiable critical and/or theoretical approaches (note: two papers from the same student which each employ a different approach will meet this measure). **RESULT = 100%.**

Although the major papers typically engaged a single theory, the students demonstrated engagement with other theories and approaches in the journal entries and in-class writings included in their portfolios. Using portfolio, rather than single-paper, review has allowed us to achieve a fuller picture of student engagement with literary theory in this year’s assessment. Until we are able to collect substantial portfolios for all students through the implementation of e-portfolio for all English majors (we hope to initiate along with our new major curriculum), our view of this outcome will depend upon what kind of materials each instructor is able and willing to collect from students in the classes themselves.

- C. In a random sample of papers from ENG 490, 90% of students will employ one or more identifiable critical and/or theoretical approaches. **RESULT = 80%.** We again fall slightly below our goal here (by a single sample paper).

Outcome 3: Graduating English majors will recognize that the study of texts representative of cultural and social diversity is central to the discipline of English.

Measures:

- A. In an anonymous survey of graduating English majors,
- i. at least 80% of respondents will “strongly agree” that at least two listed aspects of diversity are “central” to their study in English courses at UD. **RESULT= 94%.**
 - ii. at least 80% of respondents will “agree” or “strongly agree” that at least three listed aspects of diversity are “central” to their study in English courses at UD. **RESULT=94%.**

In response to a list of aspects of diversity (such as race, gender, and nation), 17 out of 18 respondents identified at least 3 aspects as “very important” to the study of English. In response to a similarly constructed list of non-dominant groups of writers (such as “Irish writers,” “African American writers” and “female writers,” 17 respondents identified 3 or more groups as “central” to the study of English. Many respondents identified far more than three in each category. The aspects of diversity most commonly identified as “very important” were race, gender, socio-economic class, and ethnicity (between 74% and 90% each). The groups most commonly identified were women writers (by 90%) and African American writers (79%).

- iii. at least 80% of respondents will provide short answers responses indicating that they see diversity as very important to the discipline. **RESULT= 17%**

In response to the question, “In your opinion, what relevance, if any, does the study of texts representative of cultural and social diversity have to the discipline of English?”, only 3 students provided responses, and all three stated that they believed diversity to be very important. The written responses were very general, however. These results are disappointing, and significantly smaller and less thoughtful than last year’s survey comments. This may be because the survey was administered later in the spring and students spent less time on it. Making the question mandatory may produce a better response rate, at least. Providing students with more opportunities to reflect on the relationship of diversity to their major study may be helpful in increasing their ability to provide insightful articulation on this issue.

- B. In exit interviews, 80% of graduating English majors will be able to identify an aspect of diversity that has helped shape the way they think about literature, writing, and/or rhetoric and explain how this is so. **RESULT = 100%.**

All 4 interviewees provided thoughtful explanations, and a greater percentage than last year (75% vs. 60% in 2010) indicated that they had taken “any or many” English courses that addressed aspects of diversity. Literature courses that were specifically identified as addressing diversity were the required

American literature survey (identified by 2 students) and electives specifically focused on diversity issues (Gender in Fiction, Africana Literature, and Literature and Theory of the Americas). Several writing and rhetoric courses that satisfy requirements for the major were also identified: Elements of Style and Rhetorical Criticism (both with a faculty member who has since left the department) and Introduction to Writing Fiction. The one student who had not encountered much diversity in the major had declared a second major in English in her final semester, after having worked her way through the coursework as a Language Arts teaching licensure student. Her EDT advisor had approved an ENG 380 course on the Lost Generation for her diversity distribution requirement because the special topics number can sometimes apply, but she did not find diversity important to the course. She was asked to teach a unit on women writers for her field experience, however, and reported having had learned a lot in the process.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

CURRICULUM & PEDAGOGY

1. Make the use of a recognizable critical and/or theoretical approach a more formal expectation for all ENG 490 major assignments.
2. Map the teaching of relevant documentation styles onto the new curriculum at multiple points. Encourage faculty to hold students accountable for adequate use of such a style in all formal papers.
3. Continue to revise the curriculum for the major with the goals of increasing the representation of various elements of social and cultural diversity and fostering deeper engagement with critical, theoretical, and pedagogical approaches attuned to diversity issues.
4. Invite faculty whose courses have been identified as especially successful with regard to our diversity goals to share syllabi, assignments, etc. in workshops and make the materials accessible on the shared server.

ADVISING

1. Encourage advisors to suggest that students choose electives that will expose them to a diversity of authors and contexts.

ASSESSMENT PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION

2. Improve methods for collecting a representative and relevant sampling of student writing.

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- a. Explore whether and how to collect student writing samples that address diverse texts, so as to facilitate measuring a more active outcome than “recognizing” diversity as central to the discipline. ENG 305 might be one source for such samples.
 - b. Prior to the beginning and end of each semester, remind faculty teaching relevant courses to collect samples electronically and submit them to the assessment folder on the common server.
3. Conduct exit interviews and the on-line survey earlier in the spring semester (mid-March to early April).
4. Require a response to the short-answer survey questions re: use of critical and theoretical approaches and diversity. Consider substituting a question re: diversity more like the one in the exit interview, which has elicited clear and thoughtful responses.