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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
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REPORT OF THE DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE
THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR IN LITERATURE

In semester I, 1997-98, instructors in 19 upper division literature courses (360 and above) collected major writing assignments from all BA4/BS4 students. Graded final exams from eight courses were also collected, pointing to one difficulty--small representation--in the design of the Assessment plan. Over 317 BA4/BS4 students took these courses, though many of these took more than one course; about 250 individuals were enrolled.

Packets (portfolios) containing five papers and/or exams were randomly selected from each course and read by three readers. The readers scored each paper on a scale keyed to the GOALS of the Assessment plan. The pilot program of a year ago gave us confidence that our plan could produce valuable information.

The aggregate scores are given below, without being broken down by course.

"Reflections on the Major" were solicited from all the seniors in the classes, but we received only 35, perhaps because, as a few respondents noted, the request for the Reflections came late in the semester. Nevertheless, we can make some generalizations. First, student satisfaction is very high; most students, prompted by the Goals for their guidance, expressed confidence that as individuals they had been well trained. Many express great pleasure with the program, remarking favorably on the faculty, curriculum, and staff. Second, a recurrent note is that they are less confident about their "awareness of the general outlines of literary history" than they would like to be; there are the usual calls for required courses on mythology, the Bible, the classics, and so on, but other students believe they have a good grasp of those contexts. Unsurprisingly, several students grouse about a variety of weaknesses and deficiencies in the department, but, save for the expressed uncertainty about the knowledge of literary history, we cannot detect a common note that points to a general problem we need to address.

RESULTS

The scores immediately below are the totals awarded for the four criteria listed as the Knowledge Goals, that is, "knowledge of works of literature in English," "awareness of general outlines of literary history," "awareness of social and historical context," and "knowledge of important literary forms and techniques," gathered from reading the exams:

High	Medium	Low	No basis
46	45	15	118

The scores immediately below are the totals awarded for the two criteria listed as the Skills Goals, that is, "ability to analyze literary texts," and "ability to interpret texts in written form (including awareness of audience, spelling and punctuation, MLA conventions, paragraph development, coherence, syntactic and lexical maturity)," gathered from reading the papers:

High	Medium	Low	No basis
97	92	37	5

The committee also scored each exam or paper for ALL the criteria. Hence we can give a complete aggregate larger than the sums of the columns above.

183

208

64

198

COMMENT

- We are satisfied with the over-all conclusion to be drawn from these numbers: the big majority of our seniors are competent or better in the criteria the department established as the Goals for our major in literature in English. We have commented to each other that we were surprised to find such a high degree of competence; our surprise perhaps reflects the fact that usually we grade papers from a broad range of students, not just our senior majors. At the same time, the very large number of "No basis" scores points to the fact that many assigned papers and exams offer the students little opportunity to connect their readings with other literature; in their Reflections, as we saw above, students commented on this deficiency in awareness of literary history. In fact, there is a big and perhaps significant contrast between the positive evidence we were able to gather on the generally high level of skills our students attained before graduation, and the inability to judge positively their acquisition of "knowledge."

- We are not happy with the results drawn from reading the examinations, as the high number of "No basis" scores reveals. The total of exams was low, partly because not all courses require a final exam, partly because it is hard to collect exams at the end of a term, and not worth the harassment of instructors to get full compliance. The knowledge evident in the exams tended to be highly course specific.

- The Departmental Committee will discuss findings in the fall to consider any reasons for adjusting the undergraduate major in literature.

ASSESSING THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR IN LITERATURE

The Department of English offers a BA or BS degree with a major in literature in English, in English Language and Linguistics, and in Creative Writing; a BS degree with a joint major in English and Education; and MA and PhD degrees in literature in English, in English Language and Linguistics, and a PhD in Composition Theory. For this beginning of assessment, we limit our plan to the undergraduate majors in literature in English and in Creative Writing and will develop plans for the other programs as we gain experience.

This plan was drafted by Professors Standish Henning (CH), A. N. Doane, Charles Scott, Ronald Wallace, and Faculty Associate Joyce Melville. It was presented to the Departmental Committee at several meetings, and reflects revisions requested by that committee.

ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE

The Chair will appoint a standing Assessment Committee, made up of the Chair, Associate Chair, and the directors of the graduate, undergraduate, linguistics, composition, and creative writing programs.

GOALS These are program goals. It is understood that no individual course need address each goal.

The following areas of knowledge are central to the undergraduate degree in English literature:

- knowledge of works of literature in English.
- awareness of the general outlines of the history of literature in English.
- awareness of the social and historical contexts in which this literature developed.
- knowledge of important literary forms and techniques.

Students completing the degree in English literature are expected to acquire the following skills:

- the ability to analyze and interpret literary texts and
- communicate such interpretations competently in written form.

IMPLEMENTATION

Reading Committee

Three faculty members (including academic staff) will be appointed for each assessment exercise. This assignment will count as a major committee assignment. The committee will report to the Assessment Committee its conclusions about what the exams and papers tell about students' success in matching the goals.

Knowledge

Final exams and exam questions from all BA/BS4 students in upper division courses requiring such exams (215 and above) will be collected at the end of the first semester. Instructors will be responsible for collecting the exams and turning them in to the chair of the Reading Committee.

A random sample of five exams per course will be read against the knowledge goals. (See Technical Appendix.)

Skills

Papers with attendant assignments representing the major assignment (as indicated by the instructor) from all BA/BS4 students will be collected and xeroxed before they are evaluated (marked up). Instructors will be responsible for collecting the papers and turning them in to the chair of the Reading Committee. (See Technical Appendix.)

A random sample of five papers per course will be read against the skills goals. (See Technical Appendix.)

"Reflections"

All BA/BS4 students in these courses will be asked to write remarks on their experiences as English majors, not specifically as members of the course. They will be given, early in the semester, two or three prompts to help them focus their reflections (e.g. "How confident do you feel about your knowledge of literature in English? Give some examples." "How confident do you feel about your ability to write analytic essays about literature." "How do you think your experience as an English major will contribute towards your future plans?").

These reflections will be collected at or near the end of the semester by the instructors and turned in to the Reading Committee.

The Assessment Committee will encourage faculty members to participate, either by questionnaire or by interview, in articulating their own estimates about whether the current curriculum satisfactorily addresses the goals of the undergraduate program.

Frequency of assessment

Following the first assessment, the Assessment Committee will recommend to the department how often assessment should occur, the outer limit being once every five years.

The Assessment Committee will receive the reports from the Reading Committee, the reflections, and write a report on its activities for the year, evaluating the outcome. This report, forwarded to the departmental Chair, will be presented to the Departmental Committee to aid it in any changes it wishes to make in the curriculum or the assessment plan.

Technical Appendix

Sampling The Assessment Committee will determine how to get a random sample of exams and papers after the course rosters have been published.

Xeroxing papers The department, as part of this assessment plan, will request student hourly funds to collect the assignments and xerox them for the Reading Committee.

First Assessment Exercise will be semester 1, 1997-98. This provides the best opportunity to do the assessment and evaluate it while the faculty has it fresh in its mind.

Reflections on the Major

The Department periodically undertakes to assess the effectiveness of our program for English majors. As part of this process we ask all senior English majors to write brief reflections on the major (1-2 pages). In writing these reflections it will help you to know the goals of the program goals we seek to evaluate. There are four knowledge areas:

- a knowledge of individual works of literature written in English,
- an awareness of the general outlines of the history of literature written in English,
- an awareness of the social and historical contexts in which this literature developed,
- and a knowledge of important literary forms and techniques.

These are two measured skills:

- the ability to analyze and interpret literary texts,
- and the ability to communicate such interpretations competently in written form.

You are invited to address any of these goals and identify any other notable strengths and/or weaknesses of the program of study you pursued as a major. Suggestions for improvement are welcome.

These reflections will be read after the semester is over by a Departmental Committee specially formed for the purpose of evaluating the major. It is quite possible that you will be asked to write these assessments in more than one class. As these reflections are not course evaluations but assessments of the major as a whole, you need write only one response. Submit your response in one class; indicate in writing to other instructors that you submitted yours in another class.

Course #, title, and paper #

Reader:

Topic	Hi	Medium	Low	No Basis-comment
knowledge of works of lit. in English				
awareness of gen. outlines of lit. hist.				
awareness of social and historical context				
knowledge of impt. lit forms and techniques				
ability to analyze lit texts				
ability to interpret texts in written form*				

*Consider such things as:

- Awareness of audience
- Spelling and punctuation
- MLA conventions (footnotes, punctuation of titles, etc.)
- Paragraph development, coherence, syntactic and lexical maturity

Assessment Procedures for The English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis

Preface: The English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis was implemented in 1978 to provide an alternative to the standard English major for literature students with a special interest in creative writing. The required course of study is 27 semester hours in the major, including 15 hours of literature courses and 12 hours of 300-level writing courses. Of the 12 hours of writing, 9 are devoted to creative writing workshops, and 3 are devoted to a Directed Creative Writing Thesis (English 695). Majors, non-majors, graduate students and special students are eligible to apply for workshops. Majors only are eligible for Directed Creative Writing.

The creative writing workshops are designed to provide professional training in the writing of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Some time is spent on theory and technique, some time is spent reading the work of established writers as models, and some short writing exercises are assigned. But the major focus of the courses is the analysis of student writing in the classroom and in individual conferences.

Goals: Because Creative Writing Emphasis majors are also English majors, they are expected to acquire all of the skills and knowledge specified in the Department's English major Assessment plan. Knowledge of canonical and non-canonical works of literature, an awareness of the contexts of literary and social history, knowledge of important literary forms and techniques, and the ability to analyze and interpret texts and to communicate such interpretations competently in written form, are all essential goals of a good writer. In addition, Creative Writing Emphasis majors are expected to acquire the following specialized knowledge and skills:

The ability to create original literary work in at least one, and preferably two, of three genres: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction.

The ability to imagine broadly, with sensitivity to language and style.

A particular knowledge of the range of contemporary literature, with special emphasis on current modes and practice.

The ability to analyze and evaluate creative work-in-progress, both the student's own and that of other writers.

The ability to read *as a writer*; that is, to read literary works not only for their social, historical, intellectual, formal, and interpretive value, but for their capacity to inspire and generate new work; to see in a finished work its process of being made.

Implementation: Since its inception in 1978 the English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis has incorporated a "capstone" course, English 695 (Directed Creative Writing). After completing their 3 required workshops, and typically in the last Spring semester before their graduation, Senior majors work closely with a faculty writer to produce a book-length or chapbook-length manuscript of poetry, fiction, or creative non-fiction. This manuscript usually combines work written in previous workshops (and revised for English 695) with new work. A poet, for example, might revise twenty old poems and write ten new ones; a fiction writer might revise three old stories and write two new

ones. The final manuscript is expected to work as a whole, and be organized and typed as if it were being submitted for publication.

Typically, three or four faculty writers work individually with twelve to fifteen Senior majors each on these projects which represent a culmination of the students' writing experience at Wisconsin. Because the instructors are reading work written over a several-year period, they can reach a fairly confident assessment of the students' training in creative writing. The bi-weekly individual conferences also serve to reflect the students' knowledge of contemporary literature, and ability to analyze and evaluate creative work.

In addition, each Spring semester, students are encouraged to submit their work-in-progress to the University Bookstore Academic Excellence Awards Competition (\$1,000 awards for independent projects completed under the supervision of a faculty member in a course like English 695). A majority of the Creative Writing Emphasis majors do submit their work which is then read by an independent University committee. Over the past five years our students have won more of these awards than students in any other discipline, and committee members have reported back to us informally on the quality of the submissions.

Further, each semester an English Department faculty member Institute fellow (not a member of the permanent creative writing staff) is asked to read a portion of the book-length Creative Theses in order to determine winners of two Departmental Prizes: The \$500 Felix Pollak Poetry Thesis Prize and the \$500 Eudora Welty Fiction Thesis Prize. The faculty judge reports informally on the quality of the year's submissions to the members of the writing faculty.

Finally, as part of the regular course evaluation, English 695 students are asked to include remarks on their experiences as Creative Writing Emphasis majors, with special attention to the four goals listed above.

The three or four English 695 instructors serve as an ad hoc assessment committee, reporting back to the other creative writing teachers in late spring or early fall on the work produced by the graduating Senior majors, on the course and program evaluations, and on the feedback from the outside readers.

Addendum: This assessment plan focusses primarily on the the course work required for the English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis. We believe that an important part of a student writer's education takes place outside the classroom as well. Thus the Creative Writing program sponsors periodic readings and residencies by distinguished writers who lecture, meet with students (both in class and out) and occasionally read student work. The Program also sponsors two magazines: *The Madison Review*, a national literary magazine, edited entirely by undergraduate students, that publishes the work of established writers from around the country; and *Canvas*, a campus magazine that publishes the work of enrolled students. The program further sponsors seven creative writing contests (Hill, Muller, Pollak, Welty, Derleth, Hart, Howard) annually for currently enrolled students, as well as five national competitions (Halls, Brittingham, Pollak, Young, O'Malley). All of this activity enhances the students' writing experience at Wisconsin and should be taken into account in any overall assessment of the Creative Writing Program. We are, in fact, constantly reassessing these programs (through student response papers, audience attendance figures, quantity and quality of work submitted) and refining them better to meet student needs and desires.

Ron, Bobbi, Brad,

As part of our Departmental assessment procedures, we have to estimate the success of our students in acquiring certain knowledge and skills. On the basis of your work with your English 695 (thesis) students this semester, please rank your students on a scale of high, medium, and low in the following categories. (I.e. list the *number* of students whom you would rate as high in their ability to create original literary work, the *number* whom you would rate as medium in that category, and the *number* you would rank low in that category. Do this for each of the five categories. I realize that with some of these, you're speculating).

- 1.) The ability to create original literary work in at least one, and preferably two, of three genres: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 2.) The ability to imagine broadly, with sensitivity to language and style.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 3.) A particular knowledge of the range of contemporary literature, with special emphasis on current modes and practice.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 4.) The ability to analyze and evaluate creative work-in-progress, both the student's own and that of other writers.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 5.) The ability to read *as a writer*; that is, to read literary works not only for their social, historical, intellectual, formal, and interpretive value, but for their capacity to inspire and generate new work; to see in a finished work its process of being made.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

In order better to assess the creative writing program, we are asking all Seniors to provide a brief summary of their experience as English majors with a creative writing emphasis at Wisconsin. In no more than a page or so, please assess the program as a whole with reference to the classes you took (the level of instruction, the range of courses offered, the faculty, visiting writers, etc.), the extracurricular opportunities you may have had (readings, literary magazines, special events, etc.), and any other issues that concern you (advising, prize competitions, related courses, etc.). What are the program's greatest strengths? What suggestions would you have for improvement? Please leave your response with either Lynn or Rosa in 7187 Helen C. White sometime before the end of the semester. Responses should be anonymous (and typed, if possible). Thank you.