

Outcomes Assessment Summary—B.A. in English, Spring 2011

Three faculty members participated in Outcomes Assessment for the Bachelor of Arts program in English. The faculty surveyed a sampling of research papers from the 400-level courses; examinations from English 310—Literary Criticism, a course required of all majors; and examinations and projects from the four language/grammar courses (all majors must complete one of the four).

Objectives: The *Outcomes Assessment Plan* for the B.A. in English includes the outcome that “students should be able to ‘employ standard research methods’ as a means of demonstrating their knowledge of literature.” To this end, majors enrolled in 400-level English classes are expected to complete a research paper which “coordinates the student’s personal perspective [on various literary works] with supplementary scholarship to achieve an informed, thoughtful, and integrated analysis.”

Data and Usage: To assess whether this outcome has been achieved, a total of six randomly selected final papers from ENGL 408—“American Origins” (offered in the Spring of 2010) were examined to evaluate the knowledge demonstrated. Criteria for evaluation included:

- initiative and thoroughness in finding bibliographic resources (books, articles, chapters);
- discrimination in selecting secondary sources: i.e., electronic sites and printed resources with scholarly standing, currency, and applicability;
- precision in documenting sources, i.e., formatting according to MLA or Chicago citation formats;
- creativity, originality, or initiative in topic selection and development;
- smoothness in coordinating primary and secondary material to achieve coherence, cogency, and comprehensiveness;
- appropriate use of quotations, paraphrase, and summary;
- a level of critical and bibliographic savvy appropriate to upper-division English classes, i.e., better than English 211/213.

Discoveries: The majority of English majors in the sample group composed insightful and thought-provoking research papers. Although limited by the historical timeframe of the class, their topics and theses were both imaginative and astute. This set of papers indicates that these students have made significant intellectual progress as they have progressed through their course of study. With respect to primary sources, some students in the sample group demonstrated a reticence to engage with quotations from the literary texts with which they were working. As researchers, these students clearly demonstrated the ability to locate and extract source material from the large volume of scholarship available to them in electronic databases and in the library. They proved to be especially adept at working with the former. In some cases, these secondary sources were poorly integrated into the papers. Although their work may contain a few technical errors here and there, our English majors are adept at employing MLA formatting procedures.

Recommendations: The English Department needs to make a concerted effort to retain the research papers that students write in their 400-level classes. That way, a more diverse array of papers could be sampled. Also, the department ought to be giving its majors more instruction insofar as working with primary and secondary sources is concerned. Our students need more

practice with both quotation integration and analysis. Several of the ongoing curricular changes in the department should help students improve these aspects of their writing. The Composition Program is currently working on developing new goals and assignments for the research papers students compose in their 100 and 200 level classes. Our new 400-level English classes, such as ENGL 435—"Authors" and ENGL 465—"Genres," are designed to encourage our majors to pursue ideas which cross the traditional boundaries of historical periods and national literatures. Coupled together, these ongoing curricular changes will give our students practice writing research papers and pursuing more innovative topics and theses.

Outcomes Assessment for English 310 (spring 2006 through spring 2009)

May 2011

Objectives

The pedagogical purpose of ENGL 310 is to introduce English majors, at the beginning of their upper-division studies, to the critical paradigms that they will encounter in literary scholarship and that they will find useful in formulating their own textual analyses. The reality is that 310 is populated with students at various stages of their careers as English majors: sophomores and juniors with many upper-division courses ahead, as well as seniors that have put the course off until their final semester at UAF.

Among the "Program Outcomes" in the Outcomes Assessment Plan for B.A. in English is the principle that the student should "be able to identify major critical methods." ENGL 310 is a key course in upholding this principle, which may be demonstrated in the "Outcomes Assessment" portion of the final exam where students are asked to respond to the following question:

Drawing on the three (or more) works of theory and criticism you have chosen [from three lists arranged by time period], please write a well-developed essay that accomplishes the following:

- *Identifies a specific concern or problem that all three essays discuss;*
- *Explains why this concern or problem is significant to literary criticism;*
- *Discusses the similarities and differences between the significance that this concern takes on in each essay, explaining what is at stake for each of the writers in the way in which they approach this concern.*

Data and Usage

50% of the responses to the above question at the end of the course in spring 2007 and 2008, as well as 100% of the responses in spring 2009 (an average of 14 students per year) were used to assess course effectiveness in achieving students' ability to demonstrate:

- Comprehension of texts about critical theory
- Basic skills in using critical idioms

- Basic knowledge of critical paradigms and methods
- Basic knowledge of critical history (from Plato through the 20th century), including changes and/or invariants
- Critical distance, including some ingenuity and/or originality in assessing others' critical principles
- Respect for the goals of literary analysis

Discoveries

The material covered in ENGL 310 is very challenging for undergraduate students, and all of them (except one student in spring 2007) were successful in demonstrating 1) the ability to read and comprehend texts and 2) basic skills in using critical idioms. Student work shows good knowledge of history of critical paradigms and methods and a strong understanding of the goals of literary analysis. Their work also consistently reflects appropriate critical distance from different models for literary criticism and demonstrates some ingenuity in assessing the principles at work in them. In each year, an average of 25% of students even demonstrated the ability to do these things at a high level. It is important to note that the above findings are all substantial accomplishments, especially for undergraduates faced with interrogating different paradigms for the literary analysis for the first time.

Recommendations

Given the overall success of students in this assessment, that meet and exceed student learning outcomes for ENGL 310, we do not have any recommendations for significant changes to the course.

Student Knowledge of History and Grammar of English

Objectives

English majors must complete one of four grammar or language courses: English 317 (Traditional English Grammar), English 318 (Modern English Grammar), English 462 (Applied English Linguistics), or English 472 (History of the English Language). The following criteria for evaluation are employed in assessing student outcomes:

- Ability to look at language analytically;
- Mastery of the terminology and other communicative tools (e.g. sentence diagrams in 318) involved in each area;
- Ability to apply learned principles to new texts;
- Knowledge of the constancy of change in language;
- Knowledge of the deeply contextual nature of language;
- General knowledge of the structure of English

Data and Usage

In **English 317** students learn and apply terms and concepts of English grammar: parts of speech, sentence patterns, verb tenses, active vs. passive voice, verbals, nominative absolutes, rhetorical figures and strategies. Six examinations from Fall 2006 and six from Fall 2009 were selected with a generally defined range of scores—two high, two above average, two at or below average. Those with a limited grasp of the terminology and the concepts behind them were least likely to achieve good results, i.e. an A or B. Verb tenses (i.e. contexts for employing particular verb tenses) and verbal phrases (gerunds, infinitives, participles), especially in relation to verbs, caused the most consistently evident difficulties.

English 318, Modern English Grammar, focuses on the “structure of current English as seen through traditional and contemporary grammatical theories.” The material covered assumes a sound grounding in traditional grammar, as the course focuses on syntactical analysis at a deeper level, employing terminology and concepts (e.g. structural trees) outside the scope of 317. For Spring 2007 six final exams were surveyed. As a more specialized course, 318 requires that students learn and use terms and concepts common to linguists and acquire knowledge of linguistic theory. The two A-range exams (90% +) demonstrated a very good grasp of the material. The exams in the B-C category (74%, 81%) showed occasional struggles in applying concepts, most notably in developing sentence diagrams. The other two samples (below 60%) showed a limited grasp of the 318 material generally and struggles with sentence diagrams especially. The Spring 2009 section culminated in a project for which students submitted the following: topic, goal, data, observations, and analysis. The most successful of the projects employed appropriate linguistic terminology and used a sample size that allowed the student to draw valid conclusions. The least effective demonstrated limited attention to guidelines and inaccurate use of terms; they suffered as well in presentation—errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure.

English 462 is a topics course, the topic varying according to instructor interest and expertise. The Spring 2008 section centered on nonstandard varieties of English. Those enrolling in a 400-level language course would most likely have an interest and background in advanced language study. The six final exams surveyed attest to this presumption. The chief distinction among the exams lay in student ability to apply terminology accurately and consistently in addressing larger ideas; the weakest of the exams (still in the B range) showed confusion about vocabulary and less coherence in presentation of ideas. Because of the variable nature of the course focus, assessment of English 462 is less valid than with the other courses.

English 472, History of the English Language, traces language development from the origins of English into the present. Six exams from Spring 2007 and six from 2009 were surveyed, both sets using short answer and essay as the means for students to demonstrate their knowledge. In the 2009 group the high-scoring examinations (90+) showed a strong and consistent grasp of the material in both short answer and essays. The two samples in the 80% + range were also strong but showed carelessness in certain details; essays were less thorough in addressing questions. The samples from the 60% + group demonstrated limited insight in short answer responses. Essay responses were general, sometimes inexact, and showed gaps in knowledge.

Recommendations

The survey of examinations and projects from the four courses confirms the findings of the previous study completed in September 2006: “Students receiving ‘A’ or ‘B’ grades show some sophistication in their analytical abilities . . . , while those receiving ‘C’s at least know central facts and techniques.” It should be noted that English 317 and 318 enroll many who are not English majors. The School of Education, for instance, requires that elementary education majors complete one of the courses. The English Department would do well to promote the distinction between the two courses; such promotion could benefit both English majors and those from outside the department. 318 presumes a background and level of commitment that 317 does not. For students entering the course without a grammatical foundation English 317 is a challenge best met with regular practice in application of all introduced concepts. The 400-level courses are electives. Students entering any of the four courses without a base knowledge of English grammar may struggle. Projects and examinations from all courses indicate varied interests and the often high skills used in addressing language and language issues.

Outcomes Assessment Summary for English Graduate Programs

Three faculty members participated in Outcomes Assessment for the Master of Arts program in English; another three participated in Outcomes Assessment for the Master of Fine Arts program. The purpose of the project was to assess the effectiveness of the MA in English and the MFA in Creative Writing. Faculty members evaluated major projects and read completed exit survey questionnaires from recent graduates. This report presents the objectives, data and usage, discoveries, and recommendations of the Outcomes Assessment project.

Master of Arts

Program Outcomes for the MA in English are as follows:

1. Students should be able to situate literary texts in English within broad historical and cultural contexts, recognize appropriate literary conventions, and interpret particular texts by means of close reading.
2. Students should have a broad understanding of the philosophy of literary studies, be able to recognize different theoretical frameworks, and be able to apply one or more theoretical frameworks to particular texts.
3. Students should be able to write clearly and engagingly about literature, and be able to produce sustained, coherent arguments at an appropriate level of sophistication.
4. Students should complete their courses of study in a rigorous and timely manner.
5. Students who are going on to work or further study in the field of English should be adequately prepared for the next step in their professional lives.
6. Students should consider their graduate program at UAF to be of high quality.

Data

The committee reviewed 5 student portfolios and 5 exit questionnaires from students who graduated in Spring 2010. Exit questionnaires were not available for previous years, but previous portfolios were briefly reviewed by part of the committee. While this is a larger number than in previous years, it still constitutes a relatively small amount of data on which to draw a conclusion. The committee suggests that next year's reviewers include this year's data to create a larger and ongoing picture of the MA program.

Discoveries

1. The student portfolios reviewed revealed a wide variety of topics and a solid awareness of literary history.
2. While the majority of the writing was well researched and critically sound, some of the theses seemed to have a weaker grasp of methodology.
3. The exit questionnaires revealed that the students had confidence in the faculty and felt that the quality of instruction and faculty guidance was high. They felt that the amount of work required in the program was fitting, and that the comprehensive examination was appropriate.
4. Some students felt that their TA training could have been better.
5. Four out of five students felt that the visiting writers/scholars program did not enrich their education.

Recommendations

- The committee felt that comments concerning TA training were a result of turnover in the composition director's position. With a new dedicated composition director, the committee felt that concern would be addressed.
- The committee also felt that a few visiting scholars might enhance the intellectual climate of the MA program. A Humanities Colloquium and a graduate student research talk series could serve this purpose. The current visiting writers program is designed for MFA students and thus it is understandable that MA students do not see it as enriching their education.
- The committee had no curricular change suggestions at this point, but felt that gathering additional information regarding MA curriculum and course variety is needed in the future. The committee thus suggested that the exit questionnaire might be revised to add three questions regarding the current curriculum:
 1. a question about a course MA student would like to see added to the curriculum,
 2. a question about independent studies students took, and
 3. a question about 400 courses students took while enrolled in the Program.

The committee reiterates a concern voiced in the last outcomes assessment review with the variance in writing quality in the program. We hope that next year's committee will take up these questions and well as the Department itself.

The committee also strongly recommends the drafting of a three-year plan by all interested M.A.

faculty to loosely determine the direction of the M.A. Program. This plan, although somewhat general, would be an important part of outcomes assessment and should become part of standard practice as the department moves forward.

Master of Fine Arts

Program Outcomes for the MFA in Creative Writing are as follows:

1. Students should be able to produce material in their chosen genre of a quality that is comparable to the material being published in contemporary literary magazines and journals.
2. Students should have a broad theoretical and technical understanding of their chosen discipline and of at least one secondary creative discipline.
3. Students should be able to write clear and engaging prose about writing craft and literary analysis and be able to produce sustained and coherent critical papers at an appropriate level of sophistication.
4. Students should complete their courses of study in a rigorous and timely manner.
5. Students should be adequately prepared for a career in writing and publishing, including an ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their own work, a sense of the literary marketplace, and a plan for seeking publication.
6. Students should be able to evaluate writing in a way that might serve through teaching or community writing/literacy programs.

Data & Usage

In order to determine whether each program had met its outcome goals, faculty evaluated the thesis and comprehensive exams of the 14 MFA students who graduated in May 2010... Faculty also considered student responses to exit survey questionnaires (see attached).

Discoveries

1. The theses were of high quality, and with the possible exception of one thesis, were considered by the evaluators to be of publishable quality.
2. Students did exhibit a broad understanding of their chosen discipline, and a sufficient grasp of one other creative writing genre.
3. The comprehensive exams showed that students were able to write clearly and engagingly about literature, but did not demonstrate a sustained or coherent critical effort.
4. Four students completed their courses of study in a timely manner, and one did not. This student left the program to pursue another career path, and chose to finish the thesis several years after having left the program.
5. While three students indicated on the exit survey that they did not feel adequately prepared for a career in writing, three of the five were able to land significant first jobs in the field. One other is

already employed in a related field, and the fifth student has had on-campus interviews for distinguished teaching positions.

6. In comparing the exit surveys from 2010 to those from 2006, it is clear that significant steps have been taken to address previous concerns. Out of the 12 surveys, the MEAN score on 15 out of the twenty questions was between a 1 or a 2. The MODE was a 1 on eleven of the twenty questions, and a 2 on seven of the questions. The surveys revealed especially high satisfaction with the thesis process. All 12 surveys showed either a very strong or strong agreement that there was sufficient latitude in choosing thesis and that the thesis construction was valuable. Students also overwhelmingly agreed that the program gave them a depth of intellectual enrichment, the quality of instruction was high, faculty were accessible, fellow students provided academic stimulation, the required work was appropriate and that visiting writers/scholars greatly enriched their education.

Nine of the twelve either strongly agreed or agreed that they would enthusiastically recommend the degree program, with 2 students neutral. Nine of the twelve also agreed that they were prepared for the next step in their professional careers. Ten of the 12 strongly agreed or agreed that they had plenty of access to research tools in the program. This is a marked improvement over the previous survey where this had been a concern.

Two questions revealed a mixed response. On the question of TA training, six of the eight students responded favorably (either strongly agreed or agreed) while 2 disagreed. As the TA training has since been reconfigured, this may or may not be a concern. On the question regarding having adequate information about and support for professional activities, the responses varied widely from strongly agree to disagree.

The main areas of concern among students surveyed have to do with the range of courses and faculty expertise:

- Students indicate disappointment regarding the balance between core curriculum and elective courses.
- Students indicate not enough attention is being paid to contemporary poetry in literature courses.
- Students indicate the range of literature courses offered is not adequate.

Recommendations

It appears that MFA graduates are producing quality work and are having considerable success in finding employment in the field following graduation. The survey reveals that students in the MFA are generally satisfied with their educational experience and feel that they are getting the faculty and departmental support they need to pursue writing careers. The faculty and program appears to have stabilized since the survey from 2006. While the majority of the concerns from the 2006 survey have been addressed, that that was the last assessment available reveals a gap. It will be important for department to assess annually in future. It might also be useful to track graduates as they continue

their careers. Student concerns about curriculum should be noted. MFA students in particular expressed dissatisfaction about what they viewed as a lack of courses pertinent to their chosen field, particularly in the area of literature courses on poetry. The English Department should review its graduate course offerings and consider including more courses pertinent to MFA students. Faculty should also consider including more poetry in their courses.

Exit Survey for Graduating Master's Degree Students in English

Program (please circle): M.A. MFA Year graduating: _____

Upon graduating I am: ☐ taking a job for which my graduate degree is a requirement
 ☐ taking a job for which my graduate degree is preferred
 ☐ taking a job for which my graduate degree is irrelevant
 ☐ entering a Ph.D. program
 ☐ entering some other academic program
 ☐ other

Please provide an answer following the criteria below:

1=strongly agree 2=agree 3=neutral 4=disagree 5=strongly disagree 6=not applicable

1. I would enthusiastically recommend my degree program to another student _____
2. I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life _____
3. My degree program gave me the depth of intellectual enrichment I expected _____
4. The quality of instruction in my program was high _____
5. I had plenty of access to research tools while at UAF _____
6. Faculty in the English Department were accessible _____
7. Fellow students provided me with intellectual stimulation _____
8. My TA training was adequate _____
9. I had sufficient latitude in choosing and shaping my thesis _____
10. I had sufficient faculty guidance and advice in shaping my thesis _____
11. The balance of required courses and electives was appropriate _____
12. My writing received sufficient attention and advice from faculty members _____
13. The range of faculty expertise available in the department was adequate _____
14. The amount of work required was appropriate for my two/three-year program _____
15. I had adequate information about and support for my pursuit of professional activities (readings, conference papers, publications) _____
16. Visiting writers/scholars greatly enriched my education _____
17. The process of constructing a thesis was valuable _____
18. The comprehensive exam allowed me adequately to demonstrate my learning _____
19. The range of literature courses offered was appropriate _____
20. Technical support (i.e., computers, access to email) contributed to the quality of my graduate experience _____

Please add specific comments about what you consider to be the most or least valuable aspects of your graduate education at UAF (feel free to use the back of the sheet and additional pages):