



## English Department

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May 20, 2016

### 2016 Outcomes Assessment Report for the M.A. in English

This report is submitted by Professors Jim Ruppert, Derick Burleson, and Eric Heyne on behalf of the English Dept. They reviewed assessment materials for five graduates in the MA in English program from the last two years. Those materials included five theses, four representative papers from graduate seminars, three Advancement to Candidacy forms, and two exit surveys. We also reviewed the previous assessment report, from 2014.

#### Program Outcomes for the MA in English:

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.

The masters theses and seminar papers we read more than adequately demonstrated that students are leaving our program with the skills and knowledge we want them to have as reflected in Outcomes 1-3 above. The Advancement to Candidacy forms tell us that these students completed their degrees in a timely manner and with acceptable grades (Outcome 4). These students also seem prepared for continued study in English, but we do not think Outcome 5 is easily measurable, especially not by using exit surveys to ask whether students consider themselves well prepared for what comes next—that would be much better measured a year or more after graduation. Having only two of five exit surveys

available means that we cannot adequately make a determination for Outcome 6 above, but in any event that Outcome does not seem especially rigorous or amenable to measurement that would result in improvement.

Although this does not correspond to any particular Outcome above, we learned from this assessment process that the current MA in English curriculum as described on paper does not reflect our graduate students' interests, nor perhaps even the materials actually being taught by our faculty in their classes. For instance, of the five theses we reviewed, one focused on writing instruction (on which we offer only one introductory class) and made use of a video game as part of its experimental methods. Another was on the theory of podcasts, a third on a trilogy of movies, and a fourth about a Native American story in a cross-cultural context, despite the fact that we offer no dedicated (much less required) graduate classes in games or new media, film studies, or Native American literature. Only one of the five MA theses focused on a traditional "English" literary text, despite the bulk of our required classes for the MA being designed around such traditional texts. The sample seminar papers demonstrate the same eclectic interests, and also reveal that our curriculum as actually taught does in fact make room for nontraditional literary texts, despite what our course titles and descriptions would indicate. It may be that we should revise our course offerings (and perhaps our hiring priorities) to reflect widespread interest in and research on new media, as well as the job market for specialists in the teaching of writing. But at the very least the department faculty should be taking this clear disconnect between curriculum and theses into consideration as part of ongoing reassessment of our program.

The Outcomes Assessment Plan for the MA in English was designed more than ten years ago, when the assessment mandate was still relatively new, but we have learned enough in the interim to be ready to make some changes, both in our program and in our assessment outcomes and procedures.

#### Recommendations:

- 1) The English Dept. should undertake a review of the MA curriculum to determine if we are offering the best possible array of courses for our students, and include hiring priorities as part of that review.
- 2) The English Dept. should revise its Outcomes Assessment Plan, beginning by looking at current best practices and examples from other programs.
- 3) The English Dept. should improve its processes for collecting and maintaining assessment materials, as currently the procedure fails to gather or misplaces those materials at an unacceptable rate. This improvement should begin with a shift from paper to electronic materials, and collection of those materials in a central file without identifying student information attached.