



2009-2010 Assessment Plan Report Plan Year 2

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT AY 2009-2010

Report Date:

School/College: College of Arts & Sciences

Department/Program: MFA in Writing Program

Person completing the Report: Catherine Brady, Aaron Shurin

1. **Overview Statement:** Briefly summarize the assessment activities that were undertaken this academic year, indicating:
 - a. This year we focused on Learning Goal 1, outcomes a and b, Learning Goal 2, outcomes a and b, and Learning Goal 3, outcomes a and b.
 - b. Catherine Brady, Aaron Shurin, and David Vann were involved in thesis evaluation. Instructors teaching seminar courses participated in the evaluation of critical papers, specifically Catherine Brady, Lewis Buzbee, Brian Teare, and David Vann. The entire full-time and part-time faculty reviewed and discussed all aspects of the assessment process.

Our primary aims were to develop and implement rubrics for the evaluation of theses, critical papers, and creative work.

2. **Please Answer the Following Questions for Each of the Student Outcomes Assessed:**

a. **What did you do?**

Describe clearly and concisely how you assessed the learning outcomes that were evaluated this year (e.g., measures, research methods, etc.). [please use bullet points to answer this question]

Learning Goal 1 outcomes a and b

- We developed and implemented a rubric to compare students' work when it was submitted to the Program during the application process to the same students' work as it appeared in their completed Master's theses. The genre heads each chose the work of three students to evaluate.
- The genre heads supervised and asked for revisions on the syllabi for the courses in the genre to ensure they met the standards for academic rigor in a graduate program.



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- All faculty were informed of the availability of the on-campus Writing Center, and asked to be aware of students who might make use of it. In addition, Thesis I advisors are being asked to identify students who might require grammatical or editorial help offered by the Center.

Learning Goal 2 outcomes a and b

- We developed and implemented a rubric to help instructors assess critical papers in seminar courses. We sampled three students in each of the fall “fundamentals of the genre” seminars: Techniques of Long Fiction, Evolution of the Short Story, The Prose of Fact, and American Poetry & Poetics. We reviewed the first paper and the last paper submitted during the semester.

Learning Goal 3 outcomes a and b

- We collected workshop submissions with revisions and two sets of peer critiques from all students in two workshop classes to evaluate student progress and the ability to utilize critical skills and vocabulary.

b. What did the faculty in the department or program learn?

Summarize your findings and conclusions as a result of the assessment indicating strengths and weaknesses in student learning demonstrated by this assessment.

Learning Goal 1 outcomes a and b

When we read the application writing sample and the thesis a student completed, we were pleased to be able to document consistent improvement in the work of the students. In their time in the program they DO become better writers. Yet we also drew general conclusions about some ways we might be able to foster still more improvement.

*Students could benefit from paying more attention to language as an aspect of style and voice and in terms of correct execution of the conventions of the genre (e.g., formatting dialogue in fiction) and of standard English grammar and usage.

*In some cases, students whose writing sample gave evidence of a voice that had vitality produced a thesis that lacked this vitality. Even though the writer may not have had the skills to shape the application material into a persuasive, complete piece of writing, the originality and energy of the voice was compelling. As students are learning to structure a more ambitious work for their thesis, they may put less energy into voice or be less capable of simultaneously performing at a



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higher level in both these areas. Or they may be overly influenced by their peers in workshop and sacrifice energy and vitality to “neatness”—a work that makes itself literally clear, and only literally clear.

*In poetry, there is the risk that students will learn an experimental or sophisticated methodology and practice it even when it is not the best expression for their given talent and their natural voice. This is an issue for all apprentice writers, in the sense that they need to explore and understand the relationship between technique and vision.

Learning Goal 2 outcomes a and b

The students in the sample all demonstrated competence as writers. Most were fluent in conventions of academic writing and literary criticism, understood how to make an argument well-supported by evidence from the text, and communicated their meaning in clear terms. Often, these were engaging papers too; many of the writers had a great sense of how to weave in personal reflection with the critical purpose of the assignment.

A student's work over the course of one semester typically didn't change dramatically, although we noted that students whose skills were less strong at the outset tended to make the most improvement over the semester. Overall, students seemed to make progress in terms of being able to relate the parts of a work to the whole--to consider how a craft element at work in the passages they cited contributed to the whole effect of the work. In addition, their close reading skills tended to improve over the course of a semester. However, it was clear that weaker students improved the most because instructors didn't accept inferior work and conference with or tutored students to help them.

The sample demonstrates that we're successfully achieving our aims with respect to learning goal 2, outcomes a and b. The biggest challenge for the students is to learn how to analyze their close reading observations in relation to the effect of the work overall and in relation to craft principles that might be at work. That is, sometimes they have difficulty extrapolating from the evidence of the text clear assessments of the craft principles at work and the effect of the writer's choices. This is probably the highest-level intellectual challenge they face, so we don't expect them to be expert at it, but we may want to continue thinking about how to challenge them in this respect. Most students could analyze a literary work in the context of literary tradition, but in a few instances they didn't make this attempt.

Students' focus on craft issues--on how the writer strategized to generate meaning--seemed to vary from one teacher to the next. This suggests that



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assignments can offer helpful parameters to students, directing them to look at how meaning is made, not just to respond to meaning. It might also be helpful to give students the opportunity in a critical paper to relate what they are learning about craft to choices made in their own work. In many cases, instructors are already doing this, and in the aggregate the student critical papers show that we are effectively achieving our learning goals with respect to critical papers.

Because improvement may not be accurately assessed in the course of just one semester, it may be effective to assess the work of the same students over several semesters. Sometimes, work in a course might be uneven—e.g., students are busier at semester's end or happen to have more difficulty with the focus of the last assignment—yet in the following semester, evidence of their learning may well be evident in the papers they submit in another literature seminar.

Learning Goal 3 outcomes a and b

We collected early and late semester samples of student critiques of their peers' writing in order to examine the development of their critical skills. Due to sabbaticals and travels of our small full-time faculty we haven't yet evaluated this material and will be doing it this coming year.

c. **What will be done differently as a result of what was learned?**

Discuss how courses and/or curricula will be changed to improve student learning as a result of the assessment. Include a discussion of how the faculty will help students overcome their weaknesses and improve their strengths.

*Instruction

1) In the workshop, instructors can draw students' attention to the weaknesses and risks of feedback as well as its strengths. The workshop tendency to ask writers for more information needs to be challenged by the instructor, if not the students. When is a request for more information valid, and is there more than one way for a writer to address this kind of question (e.g., through image or indirection)?

2) In curriculum committees and discussion, the faculty can explore the question of whether particular workshop methods will help students to become alert to the relationship between technique and vision. We might devote a session or two of the pedagogy forum to considering these questions and sharing our approaches to them.

*Curriculum

1) We can consider encouraging or requiring students in the prose genres to take Word for Word or Style in Fiction. We would recommend these courses in order



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to help build sentence level skills.

2) We might incorporate a stronger focus on language in the workshop. We could, for example, distinguish between the focus of fall workshops and spring workshops, with the recommendation that instructors devote 4-5 of their weekly “craft topics” to grammar, usage, and style. It may be particularly important in long fiction workshops to make time to address the question. How does one polish prose? Since many of the craft topics reiterate topics covered in fall workshops, there may be room in spring workshops to focus more intently on this.

3) An editing workshop, maybe a day in duration or on an evening, might accompany or precede the second semester of thesis instruction, with a focus on conventions of the genre (such as formatting dialogue) and/or conventions of written English (correct use of verb tenses, etc.)

4) We might distribute the standard editors’ marks to students and expect them to become familiar with these marks, a tool that can be used by all instructors when they wish to copy edit students’ work to illustrate a repeated type of error.

5) We will implement more detailed review of syllabi by genre heads to ensure academic rigor and formalize course parameters.

d. What student learning improvement initiatives did you implement as a result of what was learned from Year 1 assessment report?

Discuss how courses and/or curricula were changed to improve student learning as a result of the Year 1 assessment. Include a discussion of how the faculty has helped students overcome their learning weaknesses and improve their strengths.

We developed a rubric for instructors to be able to evaluate critical papers in the seminar courses.

We initiated full curriculum and syllabi review by genre heads.

We implemented an ongoing reading list of books taught in the various courses so that instructors will not teach the same books in competing courses. All instructors now submit their course texts to the Program Directors and genre heads and are required to reference the compiled reading list.

The acting Academic Director and Administrative Director developed and implemented an entrance survey handed out to all members of the incoming class designed to gather information about program outreach and student interests and goals.



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3. **Attach a copy of the components of the department/program assessment plan that have been modified since its initial submission:**
 - a. Program Mission
 - b. Program Learning Goals
 - c. Program Learning Outcomes
 - d. Program Learning Rubrics aligned with outcomes
 - e. Curriculum map that shows the courses that pertain to the outcome

Please return to: Provost Office by May 15, 2010

You can send your replies as either a Word attachment (to: marin@usfca.edu) or as a hard copy to: Provost Office, Lone Mountain Rossi Wing 4th floor.

If you have any questions, please contact: William Murry, Director of Institutional Assessment (wmurry@usfca.edu or x5486).