

## **Department of English 2015-16 Assessment Report**

Type of program: major and minor  
Humanities division of College of Arts and Sciences  
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### **Mission statement of Department of English**

The study of literature and writing has long stood at the center of humanistic education. In that tradition, the department of English educates students in the rich intellectual and creative values embodied in literary works. Because literature by its very nature expresses the complex “intellectual, spiritual, moral, social and psychological” life of human cultures, its study is integral to the Jesuit mission of valuing “learning as a humanizing, social activity.” Our inclusive curriculum fully supports “a diverse, socially responsible learning community of high quality scholarship and academic rigor sustained by a faith that does justice.”

This mission statement has not been revised since our most recent complete academic program review in 2008.

### **Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)**

1. Students will demonstrate in writing and speech the ability to develop clear and coherent interpretive essays and original creative writing; they can articulate in writing and discussion/workshop their responses to literary and/or peer texts.
2. Students will demonstrate knowledge of and sensitivity to pluralism in response to texts that focus on diversity and social justice issues, i.e. writings that underscore the complexity of race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation.
3. Students will learn to read texts from multiple perspectives: e.g. learn differentiated readings via various contemporary critical theories.
4. Students will identify characteristics of different literary genres: novel, short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama.
5. Students will identify differences between various historical periods and literary movements.

(Most recently revised in October 2013.)

### **Brief Summary of Most Recent Assessment Plan**

Our previous assessment plan, carried out in Spring 2014, assessed PLO #1. The assessment method was a comparison of written work from English 192 -- Introduction to Literary Study (the gateway course for the English major) with written work from English 410 -- Special Topics in Literature. This particular section of the 410 course carried the department's minority literature designation; taking one course that meets this designation is a requirement of all English majors. So students in the writing and literature tracks were enrolled in both of these courses. The conclusion of this assessment project was that “both classes are doing a good job of preparing students to write like English majors and to be able to talk about various aspects of literature and writing.”

### **Academic Program Review**

Our department will host external reviewers in spring 2017. Prior to this visit, we will write and submit our self-study in fall 2016. Our previous academic program review was conducted in 2008-09.

## Method

For 2015-2016, our department used our graduating seniors' capstone projects to assess our PLO #1: *Students will demonstrate in writing and speech the ability to develop clear and coherent interpretive essays and original creative writing; they can articulated in writing and discussion/workshop their responses to literary and/or peer texts.* To assess this PLO, we reviewed at roughly half of the projects produced in the spring 2016 senior seminar classes. Our major has two curricular tracks -- literature and writing. For this particular academic year, we ran one section of the literature senior seminar with 15 students and two sections of the writing senior seminar with 27 total students. On the respective class rosters, instructors of each section selected the odd-numbered students; using a rubric designed for this PLO from our 2008 self-study, each instructor then rated the selected projects from their respective sections as *Exemplary, Acceptable* or *Below Expectations*.

### Rubric:

- a) Below Expectations: Students are unable to complete critical and research-based assignments with proper literary citation styles. Students' work fails to demonstrate standard techniques and devices in creative writing. Students do not offer appropriate editorial responses to critical and creative works in peer-review and workshop formats.
- b) Acceptable: Students can complete critical and research-based assignments with proper literary citation styles. Student's creative work reflects adequate knowledge of standard techniques and devices. Students offer appropriate editorial responses to critical and creative works in peer-review and workshop formats.
- c) Exemplary: Student complete works that demonstrate superior understanding of critical writing and offer significant contributions to the field. Student's creative works are considered original and show sophisticated writing techniques and devices. Students provide excellent editorial responses to critical and/or creative works in peer-review and workshop formats.

## Results

Combining both sections of the Senior Seminar in Writing, of the 14 student projects evaluated, 5 rated "Exemplary," 9 rated "Acceptable" and 0 rated "Below Expectations." For the Senior Seminar in Literature, of 8 projects evaluated, 2 rated "Exemplary," 6 rated "Acceptable" and 0 rated "Below Expectations." If we combine all sections of the course to look across this entire senior cohort, of the 22 total projects in this sampling, 7, or roughly a third, rated "Exemplary," the rest rated "Acceptable," and none rated "Below Expectations."

All three faculty reviewers stated that these results were close to what was expected. The majority of the students produced "acceptable" work, clearly having mastered the craft fundamentals of creative and critical writing. Only a couple of students in each section produced the kind of sophisticated and original work that could be rated as "exemplary." No students produced work that was "below expectations," which seemed expected, given that this is a capstone course taken (usually) in a student's final semester, after most coursework in the English major has been completed. This is also a course that requires one-on-one conferences with the instructor and Teaching Assistants, and many smaller assignments along the way (project proposals, progress reports.) Additionally, often in the final week of the previous fall semester, instructors meet with students to inform them about the course and its requirements. Prior to the first day of the spring semester, students must choose a direction for their project. (Creative writing students must choose a genre, form and set of ideas: for example, a collection of essays exploring grief; literature students must choose a topic, the primary texts they will work with, and their second faculty reader.) All to say, there are many safeguards built into the teaching of the course, which in almost all cases, prevent a student from reaching the end of the semester with a "Below Expectations" project. The amount of infrastructure in the course all but guarantees at

least “acceptable” success, and this seems appropriate for course like this one that represents the culmination of a student’s study in the discipline.

We take this data to mean that the English Department is effectively preparing its students to “demonstrate in writing and speech the ability to develop clear and coherent interpretive essays and original creative writing.” If we take this sampling of our most recent cohort as representative of all English majors, then the majority of our students are demonstrating these abilities acceptably, and about a third of them are achieving sophistication, innovation and excellence. In terms of our curricula meeting the stated goal, we find that our program is effective.

However, one possible implication of this data is that the PLO under examination is perhaps too broadly stated. Or perhaps the rubric is too blunt an instrument to measure its effectiveness. It’s difficult to consider, for example, how an instructor of Senior Seminar in Writing or Literature might go about attempting to challenge more students to produce the kind of work that would be assessed as “Exemplary.” One suggestion of this report then is to re-consider both the rubric and the PLO, and determine as a department if revisions are possible. Could the rubric include finer delineations between its levels? Would more than three levels (“below expectations,” “acceptable” and “exemplary”) produce results that are more helpful to us in testing the curriculum? Should the PLO be written so that it is more measurable?

### **Closing the Loop**

As stated above, it seems likely that this PLO (and possibly other PLOs) need revising to be less broad and more measurable so that assessment in the future is more helpful to us as a department. This coming academic year, our department will undergo our academic program review, and this occasion provides an excellent opportunity to consider how we might more effectively position our department’s mission and outcomes.