

**ASSESSMENT REPORTS OF STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN
ENGLISH B.A. and M.A. PROGRAMS**

May 25, 2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Professor Teresa Lagrange
Associate Dean for Curriculum, CLASS

FROM: Louis Barbato
Chair, Department of English

SUBJECT: 2007 Assessment Report

**ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN
ENGLISH B.A. PROGRAM**

I. GOALS

The goals for candidates for the B.A. in English were modified at the time the curriculum was revamped to accommodate the university's shift from a quarter to a semester calendar. Following a trial period, these goals were revised by department vote on March 21, 2003.

In all curriculum matters for the undergraduate major, recommendations originate in the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies, chaired by the Director of Undergraduate Studies, then forwarded to the Committee on Instruction [COI -- the department's curriculum committee]. COI is responsible for setting the agenda for department meetings and placing committee recommendations on the agenda. All curriculum matters must be approved by department vote.

As one of the largest undergraduate programs in the liberal arts, the English major is pursued by students with a variety of career goals. Some are preparing for teaching at the secondary level; some intend to pursue further study and careers in management and law;

some look toward careers in publishing; some aspire to successful careers as writers; and some intend to pursue graduate study in language and literature.

The principal goals of the program are to provide its graduates with

1. A sound liberal arts education as a foundation for success in a variety of careers and professions;
2. A high level of competence in the written and spoken language;
3. Excellent analytical and problem solving abilities;
4. An understanding of basic methods of research and of the effective and ethical use of different kinds of evidence in constructing an argument.

II. OUTCOMES

The Department undertakes to assess the effectiveness of its program in fulfilling the expectations and in meeting the objectives of students who enroll, in preparing them for advanced study or entrance into the careers they have chosen, and in preparing them to succeed in their chosen course after graduation.

Graduates will be able to

1. Write clear, organized, and effective prose;
2. Clearly formulate a problem or question and develop a coherent and effective strategy for addressing it;
3. Analyze texts in a manner that reflects a clear understanding of them and an understanding of how language works;
4. Demonstrate an ability to find relevant evidence and to employ it properly in constructing an argument or position;
5. Express themselves effectively in oral presentations and discussions.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

- a. All English majors are required to enroll in a Senior Seminar [capstone course] during their senior year in the program. Enrollment in these courses is limited to twenty students. The seminar entails the completion of an individual research project, the production of a research paper, and an oral summary presentation of the thesis followed by a discussion of it in the seminar. The project is assessed on the basis

of the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of the writing, the coherence of the thesis, and the ability to make correct, effective, and ethical use of research resources and sources.

- b. Instructors in Senior Seminars prepare an evaluation of the overall performance of participants in the seminar (usually a one-page narrative). In addition, they submit evaluation forms for each student assessing his/her performance in the five defined areas of outcomes assessment. These evaluations include an assessment of whether the student has exceeded expectations, met expectations, or performed below expectations in each of the areas. In addition, instructors identify specific areas of deficiency under each of the five areas. (These student evaluation forms are included as “**Appendix A.**”)
- c. The general evaluations, along with the individual student evaluations, are submitted to the coordinator of undergraduate assessment for tabulation, and then forwarded to the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English along with the tabulations.
- d. Instructors in Senior Seminars also submit copies of three of the research projects completed in the course to the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English. The selection should include a project the instructor evaluated as “exceeding expectations,” a project judged as “meeting expectations,” and a project judged as “falling below expectations.” In the event that the instructor did not consider any submission to “exceed expectations,” or to “fall below expectations,” the instructor submits what she/he judged to be the strongest and weakest projects.
- e. The Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies in English conducts a blind reading of the submitted student projects and evaluates them using the Senior Seminar evaluation form. The committee then reviews the reports from the seminar instructors, and reports significant indications of weaknesses in the program, along with recommendations for curricular revisions, to the Committee on Instruction.
- g. At the first meeting of the department each fall semester, the Director of Undergraduate Studies presents the results of these assessment activities along with his/her identification of weaknesses in the major program and recommendations for program modifications.

APPENDIX A: Senior Seminar Evaluation Form

Student: _____ Instructor: _____ Semester: _____

Senior Seminar Assessment

For each of the following assessment outcomes indicate whether the student's performance
1 – Exceeded expectations 2 – Met Expectations 3 – Was below expectations

In addition, under each assessment outcome, put a checkmark beside each rubric that describes a criterion that the student's performance **did not** meet.

_____ **A. Writes clear, organized and effective prose:**

- ___ a) Demonstrates a mastery of the grammar and conventions of standard written English.
- ___ b) Effectively uses a variety of sentence structures.
- ___ c) Establishes an appropriate authorial voice and level of formality.
- ___ d) Demonstrates a mastery of stylistic conventions of manuscript preparation.

_____ **B. Clearly formulates a problem or question and develops a coherent and effective strategy for addressing it:**

- ___ a) Provides an introduction that identifies the problem or question to be addressed and indicates the structure of the following analysis.
- ___ b) Provides clear and effective transitions marking stages in the development of the argument.
- ___ c) Develops and effectively supports a clear, unifying thesis.

_____ **C. Analyzes texts in a manner that reflects a clear understanding of them, and an understanding of how language works.**

- ___ a) Clearly recognizes the difference between literal and figurative expression.
- ___ b) Demonstrates a capability of describing features of linguistic constructions accurately and concretely.
- ___ c) Clearly distinguishes between description, interpretation, and appreciation in dealing with literary texts.

_____ **D. Demonstrates skills in research and the use of sources.**

- ___ a) Demonstrates familiarity with print and electronic reference resources.
- ___ b) Selects appropriate and varied sources.
- ___ c) Demonstrates an understanding of the sources and an ability to relate them to the student's own argument.
- ___ d) Clearly distinguishes between opinions/interpretations derived from sources and the student's own opinions/interpretations.
- ___ e) Makes effective use of paraphrase and restricts direct quotation to instances in which it's needed.
- ___ f) Effectively incorporates quotations into the student's own syntax.

_____ **E. Expresses him/herself effectively in oral presentations and discussions:**

- ___ a) Delivers a report in a clear, articulate fashion finding an appropriate balance between rambling informality and the reading of a prepared text.
- ___ b) Provides a clear overview of the subject being reported on making intelligent selections of the material to be presented.
- ___ c) Suggests foci for following discussions.
- ___ d) Responds effectively to questions and challenges.

FINDINGS:

In general the assessment has been encouraging, with improvement noted in several areas since the establishment of revised outcomes in 2003. Definite improvement has been registered in students' ability to write clear and effective prose in papers that were coherently organized. These papers also evidenced cogent analyses. Readers commented that our program has made considerable progress in teaching students the importance and use of secondary sources, noting specifically that "every paper, even those below expectations, showed substantial use of secondary sources". Readers with previous assessment experience observed that they had never before seen this level secondary source research in capstone course essays. In the readers' judgment:

Overall, this assessment suggests that our program is doing well at preparing most students to write effective prose and to perform textual analysis, and that we have succeeded recently in improving our students' awareness of sources and general inclusion of secondary source material. Changes called for in previous

assessments seemed to have helped our program address the needs of our weakest students, particularly in terms of prose construction and basic research skills.

Along with the encouraging signs of improvement, however, the assessment process has continued to uncover areas of weakness. Papers continue to reveal excessive summary or paraphrase, of both primary and secondary sources; students sometimes have difficulty crafting effective transitions, which inhibits the flow of their arguments; and the impressive increased use of secondary source material has not always been accompanied by the skills necessary to manage this material effectively in support of an argument.

The report of the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies [May 11, 2007] concludes that

We need to consider programmatic changes, particularly within baccalaureate courses, to improve our students' ability to integrate component parts of their argument, and, even more substantially, to manage their sources effectively.

The committee proposes these remedies for improving the effectiveness of our program:

- 1. Offer guidelines or modules for developing enhanced information literacy within our baccalaureate courses.**
- 2. In all major courses where research papers are required, pay close attention to improving students' ability to integrate component parts of their argument.**

REVIEW:

The method through which the Department of English reviews its curriculum is discussed above under the section on **GOALS**. Recommendations originate with the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies and are forwarded to the Committee on Instruction, which is responsible for bringing the recommendations to the department. The department must approve any substantive curricular changes. The subcommittee makes a preliminary report on its review findings at the last department meeting in the spring term and its recommendations for change through the COI at the first department meeting in fall term.

The full report of the Subcommittee on Undergraduate Studies for 2007 is included as **APPENDIX B**.

APPENDIX B

To: Louis Barbato, Chair, Department of English
From: Jeff Karem, Director, Undergraduate Studies
Re: Assessment of Senior Seminars—2007
Date: May 11, 2007
CC:

Four members of the English Department's Subcommittee on Undergraduate Literature read a total of twelve senior seminar papers from the two senior seminars offered in 2006. In a procedure slightly different from last year, each paper was read by three members of the committee, rather than two. The reading was blind: i.e., no one knew the name of the student or the ranking of the paper by the instructor. Each reader completed an assessment rubric for each paper, and ultimately rated the paper as follows: 1) above expectations, 2) meeting expectations, or 3) below expectations. Following the readings, we opened up the envelopes containing the instructor's rankings and compared them to ours. Subsequently, we had a discussion regarding the strengths and weaknesses we observed across the essays. Because three of us had been involved in previous assessment protocols, we also addressed what we had observed longitudinally when comparing this set of outcomes to previous ones.

Because each paper had four ratings (from the three readers plus the instructor), as opposed to three last year, it is to be expected that there would be a bit more variability in rankings this year. Although there was not always unanimity in the ratings assigned by the different evaluators and seminar instructors, there was great consistency. There were no three-way splits—i.e. no paper received all three ratings. There was unanimous agreement regarding the papers ranked as “below expectations” by the instructors. The two-way splits typically occurred because one or more readers rated a paper as a 1, while another ranked it as a 2. Discussion revealed that these 1/2 splits typically occurred on papers that readers acknowledged were “a close call”-- strong in some respects but weaker in others.

Discussion following the rankings revealed a clear sense of agreement among readers as to what constituted the desired outcomes from our program, evidenced by our assessment rubric, which can be summarized as follows.

- Students should be able to write clear and effective prose.
- Students should be able to develop a coherent argument investigating a clearly formulated problem or question.
- Students should be able to analyze texts and language effectively.
- Students should be able to research and to select sources effectively, and to incorporate them into their investigation.

Readers found that our program has made excellent progress in helping students meet the first rubric goal. All but two of the papers showed clear and effective prose. Readers were also in agreement that most of the papers had a clear and coherent focus; only two were significantly disorganized or incoherent in structure. The analysis evidenced in the papers was generally effective, although readers noted that a number of the students combined their analyses with excessive summary and paraphrase, either of primary or secondary sources, which muddled the flow of their arguments. In terms of structure, readers observed that students sometimes had trouble crafting effective transitions when shifting to new steps in their argument, particularly when turning to secondary sources.

The rubric goal of researching and incorporating sources produced the most substantial discussion. Previous assessments have found an insufficient use of secondary sources (relevant historical and literary scholarship) in student outcomes, and reports from those assessments have advised instructors of 300 level courses to teach the incorporation of sources earlier in the program, so that students are prepared for this work in their capstone work in the senior seminar. This advice appears to have had a good effect, as every paper in this assessment, even those rated below expectations, showed substantial use of secondary sources. Readers with assessment experience noted that they had never seen such evidence of secondary source research in previous outcomes.

At the same time, it was in this area of use of sources that the readers, unanimously, found the greatest weaknesses. While many students succeeded in reporting on the sources they had researched, their management of the sources—citing them, incorporating them into their own prose, connecting them to their argument—was far more uneven. Students also showed varied abilities in distinguishing among the relative weightiness or topicality of their chosen sources. Readers, particularly those with past experience, perceived these challenges as evidence of successful longitudinal progress within the undergraduate program. The very fact that students are trying to manage and incorporate substantial research material (though not always successfully), reflects the effectiveness of past assessment reports calling for 300-level courses to emphasize more research skills. As noted above, in past assessments, readers found that too

often students did not have sufficient source material or did not speak to sources in any detail. These findings suggest the need for us to emphasize greater information literacy in our undergraduate program as part of our teaching research skills.

Last year's assessment expressed concern that some of the papers showed that a few of the students did not seem prepared for the work of the seminar paper. Readers, especially those who had completed previous assessments, found that even the weakest papers in this year's assessment showed a basic awareness of what a constituted researched seminar paper. All seemed prepared for the genre of the senior research paper, though their performances within the genre varied

Overall, this assessment suggests that our program is doing well at preparing most students to write effective prose and to perform textual analysis, and that we have succeeded recently in improving our students' awareness of sources and general inclusion of secondary source material. Changes called for in previous assessments seem to have helped our program address the needs of our weakest students, particularly in terms of prose construction and basic research skills. We need to consider programmatic changes, particularly within baccalaureate courses, to improving our students' ability to integrate component parts of their argument, and, even more substantially, to manage their sources effectively. I propose that next year the Committee on Instruction should consider offering some guidelines or modules for developing enhanced information literacy within our baccalaureate courses.

**ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN
ENGLISH M.A. PROGRAM**

The M.F.A. program in English, a consortial arrangement with Kent State University, the University of Akron, and Youngstown State University, admitted its first full class in fall 2005. *An assessment of the NEOMFA program will be issued as a joint project by the four consortial universities.*

MEMORANDUM

To: Louis Barbato, Chair, Department of English
From: Rachel Carnell, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of English
Re: Assessment of Graduate Program in English, 2006-07
Date: May 10, 2007

Assessment for this year continued the pattern of reviewing M.A. theses in light of the “outcomes” desired by the department. Our procedure was modified somewhat this year in that we made use of the exit evaluations of the theses that we have been compiling since 2003. We were uncertain at first whether or not these evaluations (completed by the members of the exam committee immediately following the defense) would have the objectivity of our random reviews by non-committee members, as completed in the previous three assessment cycles. A comparison of trends in evaluation scores by non-committee members (done in previous years) with the post-exam evaluation sheets, however, demonstrated a close correlation between the scoring. In other words, we have found that the exam committees are able to remain objective and assess students honestly during open and frank discussions of the student’s work immediately following the defense. The additional advantage to using the post-exam evaluation format is that the thesis committee is able to comment knowledgeably about the oral component of the exam. It also gives the advantage of allowing us to include every single exiting student in the assessment pool.

Following our procedure established three years ago, we now base each spring’s assessment on the data for the theses defended within the previous calendar year. This year, therefore, our data reflects the evaluation sheets for all theses defended between 1 January and 31 December, 2006. We decided whether each thesis reflected each of the “outcomes” we decided on a year ago—5 outcomes for the literature track, 3 for the creative writing track (see below). The grade of “A” means “Exceeds Expectations”; “B,” “Meets Expectations”; “C,” “Falls below expectations”; “D,” “Not applicable.”

Outcomes—Literature

- a) Demonstrates the ability to interpret texts and to defend these interpretations effectively.
- b) Demonstrates the ability to focus on and define a problem; work on this problem must have the potential to advance scholarly or pedagogical work in the field.
- c) Demonstrates the ability to synthesize an approach to the problem by drawing on the significant relevant scholarship in the field.
- d) Renders his/her analysis in compelling prose, and in a form suitable for publication in reputable venues. The writing ought to be as clear as the nature of the subject will permit.
- e) Situates his/her findings within current scholarly or critical debate on this topic; the student should be able to do so both orally and in his or her written work.
- f) Demonstrates awareness of the limits of his or her claims or analytic approach.

Outcomes—Creative Writing

- a) Analytical Section shows a clear sense of the genres(s) the student is working in, their history, and their conventions, and in what ways the student is attempting to emulate or rework such conventions
- b) Analytical section demonstrates a knowledge of appropriate criticism about the genre the student is working in.
- c) Creative Prose is appropriate for a graduating MA or MFA student.

Observations

Range of Theses

Out of the 14 theses defended in calendar year 2006, evaluation sheets in the file folder were available for 12. Of the 12 theses in this year's pool, most (9) were literature and only 3 creative writing. The relatively small number of creative writing theses is easily explained by the introduction of the new neomfa program, which has resulted in their being fewer students enrolled in the creative writing track of our MA program. We should note that 2 students did graduate this year from the NEOMFA program this year, the assessment for that program is not included in this report, since it is executed as a joint assessment project between the four consortial universities

Literature Theses

In this year's group of 9, all but 2 theses met or exceeded expectations for outcomes A, B, C, and D. By comparison with last year, in which only one out of 5 fell below one or more of these standards, the quality of our theses has stayed about the same. We therefore feel that students who finish their thesis and graduate from our program generally seem adequately trained in textual interpretation, approaching a problem, synthesizing scholarship, and writing in compelling prose.

All of the 9 students (even the 2 students who had difficulty with A, B, C, D) met criteria E with an A or a B rating, which indicates a significant improvement over last year, when in 3 out of 5 theses, at least 1 of 2 assessors was not satisfied with how well a student situated his or her findings within current debate. Credit for this improvement is probably due to two factors: 1) the thesis guidance sheets now being handed out in all ENG 510 and ENG 511 sections (these sheets have been handed out now for 6 semesters, so their effectiveness has had time to become evident in thesis results); 2) the focus that all ENG 695 and ENG 511 instructors are now placing on explaining to students the relationship between the assignments in these courses and the type of work expected for the M.A. theses.

We were delighted to note that 5 out of 9 students this year actually received a B rating or better on category F, a category in which only 1 out of 5 students in last year's assessment received a mark of B or better. This category (in which students demonstrate an awareness of the limits of their knowledge and claims) measures a very sophisticated level of scholarly awareness, and we do not necessarily expect that all of our students will have reached this level, so it is rewarding to note that this year more than half of them managed to do so. Once again, credit is probably due to the two items described in the previous paragraph, i.e. the measures our graduate faculty has taken to describe to students more explicitly the connection between the assignments they complete in their other graduate courses and the expectations for the M.A. thesis.

We should note that we have not as of yet established a method for evaluating those students who never complete an M.A. thesis; possible actions to remedy this are described in the Recommendations section below.

Creative Writing Theses

Of the three creative theses assessed this year, all were found satisfactory in every category. Only one of the theses was evaluated using the revised creative track evaluation sheet created to address the "analytical section," which had not previously been evaluated in the earlier evaluation rubric. The new rubric was not in place until the fall semester, so exams in the spring term of 2006 were still using the old rubric. However, since as director of graduate studies, I have personally reviewed every analytical section before signing graduation paperwork for the creative writing students (an effort begun two years ago when we discovered that creative writing theses did not always include the required analytical section), I can attest that no students are graduating without one. We have

therefore achieved the 100% compliance that we set as our goal for this year in last year's assessment report.

Recommendations and Actions

Literature – We should clearly continue the good policies of handing out thesis guideline sheets in every section of ENG 510, 511 and 695. Discussion between the outgoing and incoming graduate directors about the problem of students never completing the M.A. thesis has resulted in the new director making plans to assign a graduate research assistant to review files for the last 10 years (starting with the 51 students currently enrolled for thesis credits) and determine how many and what percentage of our students fall into the category of finishing all coursework but never completing a theses (or not completing one within ten years of starting the program). This data will ultimately help us explore this situation further in future years.

Creative Writing – Continued surveillance of the creative thesis analytical section may not be necessary. Future discussions about that program and its relationship to the NEOMFA program should continue. Although originally the department had anticipated that there might be a waning demand for the MA creative writing track when the NEOMFA was inaugurated, in fact, the demand for this separate MA track continues.

Response to Program Review 2006

In response to the program review completed in Spring 2006, a graduate research assistant was assigned to investigate some of the observations and suggestions included in that report. The outside consultant had suggested that our program may be “small” for the size of the university and that we may want to consider a range of exit options (such as an exit exam and extra coursework) in addition to the thesis option. The student investigated 1) whether or not our program was in fact “small” for the size of the university; 2) what other exit options were standard in other M.A. programs around the country; 3) what other program tracks were offered by other programs—e.g. tracks in teaching (MAT options) or tracks in TESOL.

Size of Assistantship Budget

The report (attached as an appendix) indicates that our program is smaller than other comparable programs that have more funding for graduate assistants, but is not necessarily small for programs with comparable amounts of funding. **In other words, the best way to increase the size of the program would be to increase the size of the GA budget.**

As a further reflection on our budget, we should note that when the extremely popular new NEOMFA program was inaugurated no new funds were granted to fund its graduate assistants. After we repeatedly lobbied for new funds, this budget was increased by the amount necessary to fund one new graduate assistant. Because we are admitting 10 to 15 new NEOMFA students each year and because they take three years to complete their 48-

credit hour program, they are quickly soaking up assistantship funds previously available to MA students in literature. In next year's budget, we are allocating over half of our assistantship budget (\$110,000 compared to now only \$92,000 allocated to MA students in literature). Nevertheless, our NEOMFA gateway admits almost three times as many students as admitted to Kent, Akron, or Youngstown, and our program is only able to fund half the number of new admits that Kent is able to fund. Already we have lost many of our most promising NEOMFA students to the Kent program for lack of assistantship funding; these students would have helped to raise the prestige of CSU, which has always been the leading presence in the NEOMFA program, but Kent now gains this prestige because they have adequately funded their portion of this exciting new program. Furthermore, we are dangerously cannibalizing the funding for our MA program, which is allocated now, by sharing budgets with NEOMFA, only about half the amount of assistantship money we previously allocated to MA students (\$92,000 down from \$174,000 in previous years). **A SOLUTION MUST BE FOUND TO THIS BUDGET CRISIS.**

Other MA track options

The report in response to the consultant's report also indicates that many similar universities offer MAT programs and TEOSL certificate programs. The report also suggests ways in which an MAT program could be designed for CSU using already existing courses. This graduate assistant is finishing up his research hours this semester by writing a memo for the incoming director of our graduate program, about the feasibility of a TEOSL certificate program.

Future Research and possible future Actions:

Gary Dyer promised to deliver a description of the department's strengths: i.e. an M.A. focused on Literature, Culture, and History. The incoming graduate director might consider asking him to deliver this promised description in time for our new brochure to be designed (for which funds were cut this year but for which funds were promised for next year).

The incoming graduate director might consider whether a faculty member in Composition or Rhetoric should be asked to join the graduate subcommittee, an idea that was floated in an end-of-year discussion one year ago. Last year we considered requesting Ted Lardner to report to us about a proposal he once submitted to COI for a M.A. track in Literature, Writing, and Pedagogy. There was not time to consider this topic this year, but next year may be a good year to take it up, especially with the arrival of our new director of First-Year Writing, a staff member who will be a member of the graduate faculty. The incoming director might consider including him as an ex-officio member or a regular advisor to the graduate subcommittee.

A "Future Report" – **An Appendix to the Assessment Report for the Graduate Program** - is available by request.