Outcomes Assessment Summary—B.A. in English

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.