NEED FOR ASSESSMENT

Professor Karafilis, English undergraduate advisor; Professor Hawley, English graduate advisor; and Professor Chari, English Department associate chair, implemented new direct assessment protocol in order to discern and improve the English BA program. We sought to determine whether students were improving in critical skills throughout the program and whether the BA in English enabled students to meet the outcomes outlined in the English Department’s mission statement (see rubric for statement of outcomes as well as the section below). Specifically, we sought to determine whether, at specific milestone moments in the major, students were performing at an acceptable level and hoped to see a steady trajectory of improvement as they move through the BA program in English. We targeted our assessment to learning outcomes that will not only maximize students’ success in the BA program, but in post-baccalaureate programs as well as a wide variety of careers.

LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSED

We assessed students’ ability to construct and support persuasive arguments in the field of English studies. In order to do so, we used the attached rubric to measured the following outcomes, which are based on the mission statement of the department of English:

a. students demonstrate a nuanced engagement with the literary text and a knowledge of literary conventions, genres, and movements

b. students develop and support compelling arguments that are situated within contemporary critical conversations

c. students express their ideas in clear and precise prose

d. students develop organized arguments and demonstrate control over the subordination and coordination of ideas therein

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

We read a complete set of papers from each of three courses and assessed them according to the attached rubric. We read the first formal essays from English 340, the final set of essays collected in English 492, and the final sets of essays from two sections of English 500. Two sets of essays were assessed from 500 in order to give us a sample of size comparable to those from the other classes since graduate seminars typically have smaller enrolments. English 340 (Writing the Critical Essay) is required of all majors, and students are advised to take it immediately after completion of the composition requirement. This course is therefore the best place to assess the skills with which students enter the program. This assessment yielded a pretest of students' abilities. English 492 (Senior Seminar) is required of all majors and is taken by students who have completed at least 135 quarter units. This class, our capstone course, is taken at the end of the program and served as a post-test in order to measure the extent to which the learning outcomes have been achieved over the course of the program. English 500, the
introductory course in the MA program, is required of all incoming MA students. The assessed essays measured the preparedness of CSULA grads to perform at the graduate level.

For each of outcomes a-d listed above (and on attached rubric), papers were ranked on a scale of 1-4: 1 (accomplished), 2 (strong), 3 (developing), 4 (unacceptable). Pluses and minuses were used and translated into .03 difference. Hence a 1- is translated into 1.3 when we compiled the raw data.

**CONCLUSIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Outcome A</th>
<th>Outcome B</th>
<th>Outcome C</th>
<th>Outcome D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>340</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>492</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500a</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500b</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our assessment indicates that the larger trajectory of student performance is, for the most part, one of steady improvement. For English 340, the first course in the major, the essays were primarily in the range of “developing” for all four outcomes. While there were a few outliers at the low end of the ranking scale (4, unacceptable), the vast majority of essays averaged, by both mode and mean, between 2.54 and 2.98. For English 492, the essays were clearly moving from the range of “developing” into the range of “strong” in all four categories. There were no outliers at the low end; there was one outlier at the high end. The majority of the essays averaged, by both mode and mean, between 2.47 and 2.48. In outcomes A and D, the papers were quite close to the ranking of “strong”; in outcomes B and C, the rankings tended to fall midway between “developing” and “strong.” This data suggests that students improved in their ability to engage with literary texts in nuanced and complex ways and also have acquired a competent understanding of literary devices and conventions. They also showed increased ability to develop organized and controlled arguments. While students are thus making progress, the data suggests the need to better train students to develop original and compelling arguments situated in critical conversations and in articulating their arguments in clear, fluent, and precise prose. Additionally, this data suggests the need for more emphasis on sentence-level writing issues, including grammar, mechanics, and syntax.

While we hypothesized there would be a greater differential between the rankings of the essays culled from 340 and the 492, the difference in the ranking of each outcome was only between 0.3 and 0.5 of a point. This less than anticipated differential may be due in great part to the fact that a number of students take 340 at a later stage of their career and have had the benefit of upper division coursework in the major. This study suggests it would be of great benefit to the students
if they were required to take 340 immediately upon completion of English 102 and before advancing to 400-level coursework in the major.

For English 500, while we read two sets of papers to have a comparable sample size to those of 340 and 492, it became immediately apparent that the 500 rankings differed greatly by section. Thus, in the above table, we have included both the gross average for 500 and the individual average for each section. For 500a, the rankings for all four outcomes were between strong and developing, just as with 492. For outcomes b-d, the 500a rankings were closer to strong than those in 492. For outcome a, however, the ranking actually went down, indicating that student performance in 500a was weaker than that in 492. This suggests that the 500a students were particularly underperforming in the area of supporting their arguments with a specific discussion of the literary elements of the texts and in moving beyond superficial observations and facile readings. For outcomes b-d in 500a, the level of improvement was roughly the same as that between 340 and 492. The lack of a more significant improvement could be attributable to the fact that 500 must be taken at the beginning of the graduate students’ careers and thus it is generally the only 500-level literature course students will have taken. The fact, however, that student performance in outcome a declined in this section suggests that the department needs to continue its rethinking and revision of the objectives of the gateway and methodology courses and, most importantly, the best means to achieve them.

In 500b, the essays clearly moved into the rankings of strong and accomplished. There were no outliers at either end and the essays averaged, by both mode and mean, between 1.30 and 1.68 for the four outcomes. These numbers register an improvement ranging between .64 and 1.17, the levels of improvement we anticipated between the courses. This data also calls into question the possibility raised above that it is the timing of taking 500 that accounts for the less-than-anticipated improvement between 492 and 500a. Students in 500b improved most markedly (by 1.17 points) in outcome c. They improved by .84 of a point in outcome b and by .64 and .68, respectively, in outcomes a and d. This suggests that while the students made significant improvement in their ability to engage in nuanced ways with literary texts, the outcome that seemed most challenging in the other courses, they also noticeably improved in the ability to construct compelling arguments and situate those arguments in critical conversations. Students also improved appreciably on the level of organization and the sentence-level issues of syntax, usage, and precision in their prose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our assessment, we recommend the following

1. The department enforce its recommended sequencing of courses so that the classes designed to introduce them to the expectations of scholarly writing in the discipline are taken at the beginning of their careers. This especially applies to 340 and 500. While we recognize the difficulty of scheduling and enrollment, our assessment clearly demonstrates that by failing to enforce this sequencing the department is actually hindering itself from achieving its stated goals.
2. The program as a whole should make more transparent to students the different levels of expertise expected at different stages of the major, from introductory courses to advanced graduate courses.

3. The department work toward a collective understanding of what its stated learning outcomes mean and what they might look like when manifested in student work.

4. The department assess the effectiveness of various means of achieving these learning outcomes.

5. The University devote more resources to design further and ongoing assessment that is more comprehensive and includes larger samples and longitudinal studies.