

TO: EPC

FROM: Rebecca Myers, Visiting Professor in English

RE: ANNUAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

Date: May 31, 2018

I. Program Assessment Meetings:

The Department of English met on January 24, 2018 for 1 hour and informally throughout the year to discuss progress on our Assessment Plan and Assessment Report (2017).

Attending: Dan Rosenberg (Chair); Catherine Burroughs; Rebecca Myers

Topics discussed: course revisions; cross-curricular connections (how to continue our work with FMS and Book Arts to facilitate interdisciplinary learning); asking students to declare their majors; Senior Seminar experience; grading rubric; balancing advising and teaching duties across the department; our position requests; sharing syllabi and evaluations; budget request.

II. Closing the Loop: Changes implemented in 2017-2018:

- A. English Department Symposium: Following through with our plan from last year to connect current students with alumni who can serve as models for a post-Wells success, we organized a symposium in conjunction with the Alumni Office to showcase our graduates pursuing careers and higher degrees in writing, editing, publishing, journalism, film, law, etc. This symposium took place in MacMillan Hall's AER on September 15, 2017, and included over 25 Wells graduates. Our keynote speaker was Millicent Bennett, Executive Editor at Hachette Book Group/Grand Central Books, who discussed practical applications of the English major. Student attendance was high, and the event received positive feedback across the campus community. The program included contact information for the alums who were willing to share it, and several current students and recent graduates expressed excitement about making these professional connections.
- B. Curricular Changes: In response to feedback from students about the need for a more global focus, we continued to revise our curriculum, adding three international literature courses (International Poetry, Prose, and Drama), the first of which (ENGL 219) was taught by Professor Rosenberg this past spring. We have also addressed student requests to decolonize the canon and have prioritized diversity in assigned texts. For example, in Introduction to Literature (ENGL 104),

Professor Myers chose central readings by black authors (James Baldwin, Yusef Komunyakaa, Jean Toomer) and then supplemented with authors who are traditionally center stage (William Faulkner, John Berryman). Professor Rosenberg taught the work of contemporary Chinese-British poet Sarah Howe alongside canonical figures like Yeats and Auden in British Poetry (ENGL 366).

- C. Growing a Cohort: Part of what our program students have listed in recent years as important to their English experience is the feeling that we are expanding and that classes are filled with diverse voices (including those first discovering a love of literature and creative writing). To help facilitate this, Professor Myers volunteered to teach SC101 in the fall of 2017. Out of her class of 19 students, 8 then elected to take Introduction to Short Story Writing (CREA 271) in the spring of 2018, and 4 of those rising sophomores have since declared either an English Major or Minor.
- D. Departmental Stability: Anxiety about the stability of our department is one of the most frequently cited concerns among our students, consistently showing up on Senior Exit interviews. Professor Burroughs' upcoming sabbatical and subsequent retirement led us to submit a position request and seek her replacement. We are thrilled to report that Professor Shilo McGiff (PhD expected from Cornell before the fall) has accepted a two-year visiting position (beginning fall 2018) and will teach a full course load, advise students, and participate in departmental activities. Her presence will help to provide the stability that our seniors have been eager for, specifically within the field of literature. We believe that her energy and focus will bring new students to the program while attracting current majors to the literature concentration. (As of now, there is only one rising senior pursuing this concentration.)
- E. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: To reflect our movement toward interdisciplinary education, the department coordinated with the Book Arts Center and the Film and Media Studies Program to lend support for their developing curricula. Professor Myers served on the Film and Media Studies Program Committee to restructure course requirements and resuscitate a program of interest to many of our English majors and minors. Professor Rosenberg served on the search committee for the Book Arts Center's Victor Hammer Fellow, who teaches courses taken by many of our students. In addition, one of our English seniors assisted in the screening and judging in the 2018 Wells College Press Chapbook contest and another collaborated closely with the Director of the Book Arts Center to produce broadsides for the Visiting Writing Series. Finally, Professor McGiff's specialization in Virginia Woolf is of particular interest to our current majors and presents a potentially valuable intersection with Women and Gender Studies.
- F. Student Publications: Under Professor Rosenberg's tutelage, one of our majors revamped the Wells College *Chronicle*, a campus literary magazine first published

in 1873, by changing staff structure and streamlining the publication process. Professor Rosenberg also gave a tutorial on copyediting to the Publications Board and coordinated with both the *Chronicle* and the *Sycamore* on ways to connect their publications to the upcoming sesquicentennial celebration.

III. Examination of the data collected for this year's targeted learning outcomes:

During this past year (fall 2017-spring 2018), we have been collecting data and assessing our progress. The responses from our Senior Exit Interviews (from spring 2018) were positive, however, we only received half back. For next year, we plan to send out our questionnaire earlier. Out of 6 graduating seniors, only 3 (so far) opted to provide us with feedback. In response to the question about if their major has prepared them for their future plans, responses included "Yes!," "Most definitely," and "This department taught me how to think critically and write well." This set of responses matches with our sense of our students' fundamental enthusiasm for our discipline and program.

The responses to the question asking about what we might do better have been more useful for thinking about how to change what we do going forward. Some suggestions from our students that we will evaluate for next year include:

- A. The cap for survey classes could be smaller (12 as opposed to 20). We love this idea but can't pursue it until our program has grown enough to warrant and staff multiple sections.
- B. Same as last year, students voiced a strong preference that our retiring full-time faculty not be replaced by contingent faculty.
- C. Expectations across courses should be uniform. One respondent pointed out that professors in the department don't consistently require students to adhere to the same updated 2018 MLA guidelines (italicizing vs underlining book titles, for example). This has already been resolved for next year.
- D. One student requested that important information (like office hours and syllabi) be made available in print as well as posted online.
- E. One student asked that our department be more conscious of what course texts we require; in one class, they were stuck with expensive books when only an excerpt was ever assigned.
- F. One student mentioned the use of our more stringent grading rubric for literature classes. This wasn't necessarily a criticism but more of an observation that we have implemented a more rigorous assessment. Professor Myers noted that in her spring American Lit Survey Class (ENGL 215) of 16 students, the average final paper score based on this rubric's categories was a 73 (C), much lower than students expected or last year's assessment plan had projected. Professor Rosenberg's International Poetry (ENGL 219) had an average final essay score of

85 (9 students submitted). His British Poetry (ENGL 366) had an average final essay score of 74 (8 students submitted), and his American Short Fiction (ENGL 385) had an average final essay score of 85 (16 students submitted). We as a department feel that it is our responsibility to hold Wells writers to a high standard, and while we may slightly revise the weights given to specific categories, we concur that this new rubric is more of a success than a hinderance. We also believe it will become more successful as our students grow more comfortable with it.

- G. Multiple students requested earlier foundational writing training (Professor Myers heavily revised ENGL 104 this year, but unfortunately, these seniors had already met this requirement). We remain optimistic that next fall's inaugural mandatory freshmen composition course (which is not under our department's jurisdiction, but which Professors Myers and Rosenberg helped to propose) will also provide these essential skills. Of course, we don't expect to see the dividends from this next fall.

IV. Program Changes for the Upcoming Year (2018-19):

- A. We are gratified to learn from current seniors that our efforts to enhance the Senior Seminar have been appreciated. Further, we have taken to heart the main concerns about the curriculum and the major, and our efforts to revise them both have been well received. We will pay close attention to how students react to these new structures to ensure that they are serving their intended function.
- B. In response to student interest in world literature and our embrace of a more comprehensive curriculum, Professor Rosenberg will be offering another new course next fall with global emphasis (International Prose, ENGL 204). In response to mounting student enthusiasm for world-building, chapter structuring, and long-form storytelling, Professor Myers has decided to teach Advanced Fiction Writing (CREA 371) as an exploration of novel writing. She is also envisioning a spring 2019 special topics novel course centered around marginalized American voices, again taking into account student interest in diversity.
- C. We expect student performance to improve as we guarantee program stability. For 2018-20, Professor Shilo McGiff will join our department as a full-time Visiting Assistant Professor of English specializing in British Literature. We also plan to submit a position request for a tenure track Professor of Creative Writing and conduct a national search in the spring of 2019, when Professor Myers' two year visiting contract will expire. The qualified candidate will hold an MFA in Creative Writing and preferably an advanced degree in English, as well as extensive higher-education teaching experience. Because of the overwhelming popularity

of our creative writing classes, we have decided that it is most beneficial to our students to establish another permanent line in creative writing rather than literature.

- D. By giving our students intimate access to national writers who come to campus to share their work and expertise, we broaden the range of influences under which our students learn. The Visiting Writers Series has instituted, under Professor Rosenberg's leadership, a series of master classes. Next year, we aspire to bring more fiction and nonfiction writers to campus (this past year was heavy on poets), as well as writers of color (this past year, we hosted two).
- E. In pursuit of similar goals, we try to integrate our creative writing students with other communities. Next year, Professor Myers plans to collaborate with Professor Desmond Cummins to find ways for his computer science students to work with her fiction writers on "choose your own adventure" hypertext projects. Providing an online platform for undergraduate fiction will excite our burgeoning writers as well as promote the college online (links can be easily shared). It is our hope that through this kind of collaboration, we can entice more mathematically-inclined students to take an English course and diversify the classroom experience. In addition, on a national scale, we want to prioritize finding ways for students to attend conferences like AWP (Associated Writing Programs) and be part of a larger conversation.
- F. To provide our students with uniformity, our department has designed and adopted a new grading rubric for essays, which we are using in our literature and theory courses. To improve critical writing in our students across the board, we will continue our retooling of ENGL 104 to better shift the focus from close readings of texts to how to *write* about texts (analysis, argument, research, etc.).

V. Action Plan for the Upcoming Year:

We believe we have addressed several of the most important impediments to our students' success, but we will closely examine both the Senior Exit Interviews and the course evaluations next year to confirm. We will also continue to have informal discussions with students about their experiences in the classroom, and we will continue to experiment with new offerings and approaches, relying on the foundation of a more predictable and clear curriculum, to try to balance the desire for stability against the desire for innovative material and approaches.

The Learning Outcomes we are most intent to focus on for the coming year are those associated with ENGL 104: Faculty with the relevant technologies of our field (section Ca), research skills (Cb), and critical writing (Ba).

Several students this spring expressed frustration about the prerequisite for our introductory creative writing courses. Professors Rosenberg and Myers, who teach those courses, have decided to strip away the prerequisites next year, as they are not essential to success in those courses, allowing students to get an earlier start on major requirements and opening up the courses to students who have not taken ENGL 104. We believe this will diversify the experiences and skill sets in these workshop classes, and that such diversity will enrich the experience for all students.

We've taken note of disappointing student performance on final essays in literature courses and how our department didn't meet the critical reading/writing success criteria enumerated in last year's assessment (100% of students at C or above, 70% at B or above, 30% at A). Rather than abandon our criteria and rubric, we will implement a tiered action plan for student success based on course level. Pending approval at our next department meeting, the following (or something similar) will take effect: English 104, our introductory course geared towards writing about literature, will see the most class time devoted to composition; 200-level courses will have at least a week of writing review built-in; and 300-level courses will require at least one remedial class on topics such as thesis development, paragraph transitions, and citations. We are also going to pay careful attention to how our standardized rubric functions across our course offerings, in hopes that it will provide us with more clear, usable data.