

Assessment Report, February 4, 2013 Major in English

In our 2010 assessment report, the faculty in English developed an action plan focused on the senior thesis and the comprehensive exam. As a result of our assessment of these two requirements for the major, we have made strategic changes to the senior thesis, and completely overhauled the comprehensive exam. Our current assessment examines how changes to the thesis requirements, and our more radical revision of the comprehensive exam, have affected student learning and helped prepare our majors for graduate school or professional careers. A third focus of this study involves our procedures for advising and accommodating transfer students, especially those who enter as juniors.

The Senior Thesis

For many years prior to 2010, our guidelines for the senior thesis, whether literary analyses or creative writing, stated that the thesis should be 30-35 pages long, including an introduction. Over the years, a culture developed in which many students viewed longer as better, and a number of majors submitted essays of 40, 50 or, in one case, 90 pages, occasionally well written, but more often sacrificing quality of analysis and expression to length.

Apart from the burden on the thesis advisor and second reader for these lengthy theses, we are aware that graduate programs our students often apply for—such as a PhD in English, an MFA in creative writing, a law degree, an MS in library science—request more limited writing samples. Our current statement of requirements for the senior thesis (see attached) emphasizes quality over quantity. In the 401 workshop we discuss the value of writing one or two short stories or works of creative nonfiction, or a scholarly literary analysis, of the length and quality a literary journal would consider for publication, and graduate programs would accept and read in evaluating students for admission.

Our 2010 plan also referred to our offering ENGL 401 both fall and spring of the senior year. This possibility was raised in part because we had a relatively high number of seniors for several years, with 20 in the fall of 2009. More recently, however, we've had fewer senior English majors, with 15 in fall 2010, 16 in Fall 2011/1 in Spring 2012, and 12 in Fall 2012. Nonetheless, since we all advise students on their theses, and participate in the 401 workshop, English faculty have an overload every fall.

Some students also find writing the thesis in a single semester difficult, and though we have long required rising seniors to submit a preliminary proposal for their theses in the spring of their junior year, with the idea that they will start research and drafting over the summer, few spend time on the thesis until they're back on campus. Last spring we discussed breaking down the process, and the semester hours allotted, offering 1 semester hour in the spring for juniors to develop a thesis

proposal and begin research, followed by a 3-semester hour workshop in the fall, a change we may initiate in the 14/15 academic year.

The Comprehensive Examination in English

In fall 2010 we developed a new model for our comprehensive exam to address concerns we had with the long-standing practice of requiring an essay exam under time constraints (see attached Comprehensive Examination). Though no English major had failed the exam in recent history, and though we had made changes that allowed students to take the exam at a time and in a place convenient to them, we often felt students learned little from the experience itself. In addition, in some instances students lost track of time and ended up writing two well developed and specific essays and then hastily scribbling a couple of paragraphs for the third. As a result, a student who had otherwise done distinguished work might not receive distinction in the major.

In spring 2011, we gave our senior English majors the option of either taking the traditional timed 2-part exam or constructing a portfolio of essays from their English courses, prefaced by an introductory essay reflecting on their work (see attached information on the Comprehensive Examination by Portfolio). Three students chose to take the traditional timed exam, while 12 chose to submit a portfolio.

In spring 2012 all senior English majors were required to submit a portfolio for the comprehensive. As with the traditional timed exam, all students passed, and about the same number received distinction. However, students reported that the process of looking back over their work was valuable in itself, allowing them to see how their analytical and expressive abilities had developed. As faculty, we had a similar experience reading through the essays they selected, and seeing how our majors had become more thoughtful in their approaches to literature, and better able to structure and support an argument.

Advising Transfer English Majors

Many transfer students choose to major in English, and over the years some have encountered difficulties in completing remaining college breadth requirements along with the requirements for the major. While at the advising level we have addressed such problems through course substitutions and independent study, we recognize the need to better plan and coordinate our course rotations so transfer students are fully integrated into the major. We plan to discuss the needs of transfer students each semester when we meet to plan course offerings in order to minimize conflicts with required courses. In addition, if a transfer student takes a semester abroad, we will look carefully at how the course choices fit into the requirements for English.