

**Macalester College
English Department
Department Assessment Plan**

Submitted to Kendrick Brown, Associate Dean of the Faculty
January 31, 2014

I. Department Student Learning Statement

Our department's mission statement clearly sets forth our shared vision for students' learning:

The English Department at Macalester College offers students the opportunity to study fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fictional prose from the British Isles, America, and English-language cultures around the world. Students learn to interpret these works from a variety of theoretical perspectives and to develop their knowledge of literary history. Our students develop skills in critical thinking and in expository, analytical, and creative writing.

II. Department Learning Goals and Outcomes

Goals for Students' Learning

Our department emphasizes close reading, critical inquiry, and engaged communication (written and oral). Our aims: that students gain fluency with literary-critical vocabulary and the implications of genre; that they gradually develop a capacity to situate literary texts in larger frameworks (comparative, theoretical, historical, literary-historical, or formal); that they learn to think critically through writing, while working toward clear prose and effective argument, beginning with sentence- and paragraph-level mechanics. We also seek to train students in creative writing, including poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

Outcomes of Students' Learning

By the time that students complete a major in our department, they will be able:

1. **to demonstrate fluency in English and Anglophone literature** across time periods, and demonstrate depth of field and breadth across genres.
2. **to display a critical vocabulary**, and apply this language to analyzing texts and related cultural forms (image, film, music, popular culture).
3. **to situate texts within literary, cultural, ethical, political, and historical frameworks**, and make links between texts and their lived community contexts.
4. **to communicate clearly, effectively, and creatively**; both orally and in written work; with attention to diction, syntax, and style; and across genres.
5. **to make connections between the discipline of English and other fields**, in tandem with the College's goals of Internationalism and Multiculturalism and in

dialogue with the range of cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, and orientations that makes up the Macalester community.

III. Department Assessment Strategies

We believe our department's assessment strategy to be "meaningful, manageable, and sustainable." Because we are mindful to incorporate what we've learned from the previous year's assessment into our assessment plan every year, our practices vary. In recent years, we have analyzed students' written work, administered written surveys to selected groups of students, and collaborated with the Assessment Office to conduct in-person interviews. In particular:

1. To assess students' **fluency in English and Anglophone literature** across time periods, fields, and genres, we interviewed senior English majors in spring 2013. In fall 2013, based in part on the results of that assessment, we administered a survey to all students in all English courses to gauge students' experience of our course-numbering scheme. *During spring 2014, we will gather and evaluate senior capstone projects from our literary-history capstone offered in the previous term, assessing for fluency in literary history.*
2. To assess students' **critical vocabulary and analytical skill**, we examined representative samples of students' written work at the introductory level, in 2010, and in senior seminars in literary history, in 2012. The work we did in this regard led us to change the structure of the English major. *In spring 2014, our assessment of capstone projects will include an evaluation of critical vocabulary and analytical skill.*
3. To assess students' **ability to situate texts** within literary, cultural, ethical, political, and historical frameworks, *we plan to develop a schema, during spring 2014, clarifying among ourselves how to identify this kind of skill in student work and in course syllabi, for regular use beginning in 2014-15.*
4. To assess students' **ability to communicate clearly, effectively, and creatively**, we examined representative samples of English majors' writing in senior seminars—in literary history in 2012, in creative writing in 2013. *Our assessment of capstone projects in 2013-14 (two literary history capstones, two creative writing capstones) will include evaluation of effective communication based upon the criteria we've already worked out for writing skills.*
5. To assess students' **ability to make connections between English and other fields**, *we plan to study our own team-taught and interdisciplinary courses to adduce how they make such connections, and to ask seniors (2014) and juniors (2014-15) to write reflective pieces that encourage awareness of such connections. (These written reflective pieces emerge from Theresa Krier's work through the Mellon Reflective Practice Cohort; her project for that two-year program is precisely to develop written reflective work for students to assist assessment and to enhance advising. In spring 2014, the two capstone courses are participating in a trial run of that material.)*

IV. Four-Year Timeline to Implement Assessment Strategies

To situate our plans for assessment in context, here is a brief discussion of our strategies since 2010, the year we began conducting formal assessment activities.

- In 2010, we conducted direct assessment of **students' writing from our introductory courses**. The results of that assessment led us to develop and implement a new and specific set of pedagogical objectives for our introductory courses, to change the conceptual orientation of those courses in general, and, consequently, to alter the curricular contours of the major as a whole.
- In 2011, we collected **final projects from students in English "capstone" seminars** and assessed them directly. Discussions that followed the 2011 assessment led us to adopt a new procedure for 2012. To learn more about students' experiences of the English major more generally, we asked the Assessment Office to help us conduct interviews of English majors.
- In 2012, the department recruited graduating English majors to discuss their **experiences of the major** in blind focus groups. Kendrick Brown and Nancy Bostrom facilitated discussions in three groups. In April, the Assessment Office submitted to us a report of their findings from the focus groups. This report provided a thorough look at the experiences of the particular students who participated.
- In 2013, (1) we administered a survey of all students in all English courses to gauge their perceptions of our course-numbering régime—a convenient proxy for the overall **structure of our curriculum**. The results of this survey, especially as combined with the results of last year's focus groups, will help the department achieve a synoptic view of our students' learning across the major as *they* perceive it. That overview will generate a more nuanced view of our progress in achieving our goals for students' learning. (2) In spring 2014, our capstone courses will be working with those Mellon-developed reflective writing practices. (3) In spring 2014, we will meet with all our senior majors to discuss their experience (having learned from Kendrick and Nancy's experience in 2012 what works and what doesn't, in that process).

Based on our experience, we hope—indeed, we expect—that our future assessment activities will change to accommodate the unanticipated questions that emerge from previous activities. We also expect that the questions we find pressing will change, over the years, as our goals develop and our faculty roster changes. Such dynamism, we believe, is the aim and end of assessment. For now, a tentative sketch of the coming years' activities looks something like this:

- In 2014 (i.e. the 2013-14 academic year) we will (1) include Mellon reflective writing in the two spring-term capstones; (2) gather and evaluate all senior capstone projects from the entire year; (3) collect data on our team-taught and interdisciplinary courses in regard to the ways they build connections with the world and with other disciplines. (The Mellon reflective pieces aim to help with this goal, also.) Implementing and contact person: Theresa Krier.
- In 2015 (i.e. academic year 2014-15), we will (1) include Mellon reflective writing in all 4 capstones; (2) gather and evaluate all senior capstone projects; work out an action plan for ways to implement those connection-building aspects of the courses we looked at in #3 above; (3) meet with all seniors to discuss the English major. Implementing and contact person: Theresa Krier.

- In 2016 (i.e. academic year 2015-16), we will repeat # 1-3 from the year before. We also hope to evaluate the best essay from each *junior* major, and to implement connection-building systematically. Contact person: Daylanne English.
- In 2017 (i.e. academic year 2016-17), we will turn attention to our 100-level courses again, looking closely at how we teach the skills of our department's learning goals, and starting reflective-writing practice with those students. (Theresa Krier, the point person for reflective writing practice, will be in MSFEO and will contribute her time to the department for this part of the assessment plan.) Contact person: Daylanne English.