

English Department Assessment Plan/Report

October 7, 2011

In 2009, the department conducted an alumni survey, asking respondents about the strengths and weaknesses of the English program. One weakness was consistently reported: the program needed to give potential graduate students more practice in research. As a result, the department created a senior honors capstone sequence. In the Fall semester (1 credit), students choose a research topic and create an annotated bibliography; in the Spring (3 credits), they write a ~20 page paper and present their findings at the Juniata Liberal Arts Symposium. Each student works one-on-one with a member of the English department, who helps guide their research and reviews the project. Students do have an option to do a large-scale creative project (such as a novel) instead of a research paper; however, in the one case in which a student chose such a project, he was asked to do extensive reading in preparation and to prepare an annotated bibliography of that reading.

In the academic year 2008-09, the department began its large-scale assessment program. Beginning with the students who entered Juniata in Fall 2008 (class of '12), we asked all students with English as part of their POE to provide us with copies of all the papers they did in English department courses. Once three years of data were collected from the same class, we assessed a cross-section of the papers by the attached rubrics.

Our findings/responses were threefold:

- 1) Students improved in most categories from freshman to junior year; however, there was a noticeable dip in performance in the sophomore year. We hypothesized that this was a result of the students' confronting more difficult tasks for the first time. We will check our next set of data (to be collected after this academic year) to see if the pattern holds. If so, we will consider whether to make the transition from junior to sophomore year easier.
- 2) Students consistently scored their lowest on the "Opening paragraph," "Thesis statement," and "Conclusion" standards. As a result, we are making these elements of the paper a priority in our teaching.
- 3) The vast majority of the student papers were scored N/A for the "Literary History and Terminology" rubric, as well as for the "Variety of critical approaches" and "Generic nature of literary texts" aspects of the "Critical Reading" rubric. We found that we were not asking our students to do such tasks in their papers; however, we were asking upperclass students to do such tasks on their take-home exams. We decided to add take-home exams to the assessment pool, beginning in this academic year.

Now that the assessment program is entering its fourth year, we will have data from all English students in all classes. We will continue to assess those papers in accord with the accompanying rubrics.