

**English Department Assessment Program**  
Passed by departmental vote, April 26, 2000  
Provisionally approved by the Assessment Committee, May 15, 2000

In this document we outline the common and fundamental **objectives** for the English major, the **methods** that the English Department will use to conduct regular assessment of its major, and the **criteria** by which we will conduct the assessment.

### **Objectives**

Each departmental assessment program subdivides its objectives into three categories: knowledge, skill, and values, i.e., what students should know, what they should be able to do, and what they value. Any attempt to describe objectives requires the creation of subdivisions and will unavoidably separate objectives that naturally complement and overlap one another, and it will fail to include objectives that defy categorizing but are nonetheless important to our mission. When, in the course of assessing our program, we ask students to compose responses to the following objectives (see the “Methods” section of this document), they should be encouraged to note and discuss relationships among categories. The categories and items within them should suggest architectural models and building materials but should not confine or restrict students. Students should use these models and materials to articulate their ideas about what they perceive to be the most important goals of our major—goals, such as richer comprehension and apprehension of the joy we find in literary beauty and truth, which cannot be neatly categorized or measured, but which ultimately define the Reformed Christian mission of the English Department.

#### *Knowledge*

- Literary traditions. In this category the most basic question majors should be able to answer is this: How does literature create beauty, value, and meaning? Students answer that question by learning about genres (e.g., poetry, fiction, drama), techniques (e.g., rhyme schemes, narrative points of view, dramatic plot structures), historical periods and movements (e.g., metaphysical poetry, British romanticism, American transcendentalism), and the literary canon (the essential writers and works in the canon and how the canon is constructed and reconstructed).
- Linguistic traditions. In this category we ask a corollary to the preceding question: How does language create beauty, value, and meaning? We study both the history of the English language and theories of how all language functions (e.g., semiotics).
- Critical traditions. English majors should learn that critical traditions—from classical to contemporary—influence our understanding of language and literature.
- Cultural traditions. English majors should learn not just about literary texts but about their cultural contexts; English majors should know how, for example, politics, the history of ideas, and particular social configurations influence language and literature.
- Christian traditions. English majors should learn how Christian traditions (e.g., hermeneutics, doctrine, church history), and Calvin’s Reformed Christian traditions in particular, influence language and literature.

#### *Skill*

- Reading. English majors should develop the skill to read actively, exercising their imagination, detecting significant details and patterns, and responding to what they read. They should be able to articulate and

analyze their responses—intellectual, emotional, spiritual—in ways that help them to better understand texts and to recognize how they participate in the creation of literary and linguistic beauty, value, and meaning.

- **Writing.** Frequent written assignments should enhance students' rhetorical skill—their ability to compose in a variety of genres (e.g., critical papers, book reviews, reflective personal essays) and to make effective choices in a variety of rhetorical situations (i.e., when writing for various audiences and purposes). The writing that students compose should help them to achieve the goals of both the college's and the English Department's Writing Program: improving their skill in written rhetoric and their ability to use writing to enrich learning. Wherever appropriate, skills in written rhetoric should be enhanced through the practice of oral rhetoric. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to write creatively and should be given opportunities, in and out of normal course requirements, to practice creative writing. To help students achieve these goals, instructors will give feedback on all writing assignments.
- **Synthesizing.** English majors should develop the ability to draw connections among information, ideas, readings, and written assignments, within and among courses. Most important among those synthesizing activities is students' ability to draw connections between their faith and their studies.
- **Speaking and Listening.** The skills that we expect students to practice in the classroom are perhaps most difficult to measure but are also essential to the study of literature. Students should be able to listen with wisdom, respect, discretion, and intelligence. They should then be able to and feel encouraged to give voice to their questions and ideas.

### *Values*

English majors should value the activity of engaging literature and language—and to value being driven to and through that activity by faith. In explaining why she pushes students to write about what they “passionately want to explore,” Susan Felch writes,

I nag, I harangue, I insist on rewrites and individual conferences, I wear myself out. Why? Because living a life of faith . . . can't just be done on automatic pilot. So I want [students] to catch the vision that thinking deeply, and then caring about other people enough to communicate those thoughts clearly, is part of living a faithful life.”

Students should value both the aforementioned **traditions** and the **skills** that will enable them to be keepers and shapers of tradition. These conservative and creative activities of literary and linguistic study should function in their discovery their own place and purpose in God's world. Again, the words of a colleague come to hand:

As we read stories of others, we become attuned to our own stories, attuned to discerning the hints and guesses, the tokens of grace. . . . In other words, the study of literature teaches us how to pay attention, to watch and wait, to sharpen our seeing and our hearing to discern both pain and love, the seeming absence and real presence of God.” (Roy Anker, *Christian Educator's Journal*, Dec. '93).

So we gesture toward that which we hope and pray our students will cherish.

### **Methods**

Our assessment methods fall into three categories. Findings gained from each of the three categories of methods will give us information about how well our students are meeting the objectives of knowledge and skill; only the findings from the third method will allow us to assess their achievements in the “values” category of objectives.

#### *Data Collected Outside of the English Department*

Data from Graduate Record Examinations, from the survey of graduates conducted by the Calvin Social Research Center, and from the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification will be collected each year.

### *Information Collected from Course Syllabi and Assignments*

All course syllabi and assignments will be collected by the departmental secretary each semester.

### *Information Collected from Students in Seminar Courses*

Students in English 395 (“Senior Seminar”) will compose written responses to the respective “Objectives” for the English major. These responses may be gathered through an essay exam or through a series of essays or journals. Whichever method an individual instructor chooses, the students’ responses to the departmental “Objectives” should address each of the three categories (knowledge, skill, and value), reflecting on the entire major and illustrating comments with specific examples that assess the strengths and weaknesses of the major program. The departmental secretary will collect and store these.

Our method for analyzing the materials gathered will be to (1) ask the departmental secretary to compile all of the above information and data, (2) conduct a minor review of the information and data every year (the chair will review the information and data and discuss it with instructors of English 395), and (3) conduct a major review of the information and data every three years (the chair will appoint an *ad hoc* Assessment Committee to assist in reviewing and assessing the information and data, and in making appropriate recommendations to the Department). The major review conducted every three years will include an assessment of the Departmental Writing Program (procedures are explained in the document entitled “English Department Writing Program”).

## **Criteria**

As the chair, the instructors of English 395, and the members of the Assessment Committee review the materials collected for assessment, they will measure those materials through the following questions:

Does the data from outside sources indicate any insufficiency in the preparation of English majors?

Is the amount of work assigned sufficient to enable students to achieve departmental objectives?

Is the variety of work assigned sufficient to enable students to achieve departmental objectives?

Do students find the objectives sufficiently familiar to demonstrate that they have addressed the objectives frequently and specifically?

Do students articulate their responses to the objectives with clarity and specificity?

Are students able to wrestle with objectives? In other words, do students avoid canned responses? Are they able to synthesize, to question, and to assess objectives (and the ways those objectives are articulated) with maturity and creativity?

## **Evaluation of the Assessment Program**

As Assessment Committees prepare their reviews, they should comment on the effectiveness of the Assessment Program, suggesting additional or revised objectives, methods, and criteria. One major objective of such program evaluation will be to determine how well our methods provide information to help us assess each of our particular objectives.