**University of Utah English Department**

**Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan**

**Learning outcomes assessment procedures**

In 2018, spurred by a University-wide accreditation review that encouraged all Colleges and their constituent units to begin to develop them, the Department put into place the elements of a Learning Outcomes Assessment protocol. (Hitherto our assessment efforts had been limited to informal exit surveys of undergraduates, feedback from student evaluations and student committees, and, in the case of graduate programs, analysis of placement statistics.) This protocol covers undergraduate education only, and will enter its pilot stage in 2019-2020. A brief account of its rationale, procedure, and criteria follows below.

*I. Rationale*

The groundwork for self-assessment was laid in 2014, with structural revisions to the Major curriculum expressly designed to facilitate it. We established a common starting point and endpoint for all majors, through the creation of Introductory and Advanced (Capstone) Seminars. The first of these is ENGL 3850: Seminar in Literary Study. New majors are required to take it as soon as they declare, and it serves as a prerequisite for all upper-division coursework. Rather than a survey or sampler, ENGL 3850 is a methods course. Concentrating on a small cluster of thematically linked texts (for instance, a canonical novel, poetic oeuvre, or short story collection, followed by representative critical and theoretical statements about it, followed by adaptations or creative responses to it), the course equips students with modular, practical training in the fundamentals of the discipline, from close reading, to research, to evidence-driven, scholarship-situated interpretive argument. Capped at 15, it is a true seminar, enabling 1-on-1 guidance and an intensive, process-based approach to academic writing: drafting, peer-editing, revision. Students are not—or are not *just*—studying literature: they are learning how to “do” English, building the core skills that will ensure their success throughout the major.

This course pairs symmetrically with our capstone course, English 5650, which is similar in structure and also capped at 15, similar in structure, but organized by more advanced questions and intended to facilitate more ambitious and sophisticated work. The term paper with which 5650 culminates represents a substantial research project, independently conceived, defined, and executed, for which students spend most of the semester preparing: writing proposals, conducting research, compiling bibliographies, giving in-progress presentations, producing and successively revising (both in isolation and collaboration) drafts of between 15 and 20 pages in length. ENGL 5650 is where their skills as English majors are perfected and brought to fruition.

The bookended relationship of these two courses gave us a natural structure for assessment, as well as options for how to pursue it. Because they mark where students formally enter the major and where they exit it, we can measure the development of their skills either in absolute terms, as a function of the quality of work they leave able to produce, or in relative terms, as a function of how that quality has improved. The final projects they submit in each may vary in scale, but they emphasize the same core set of skills, rendering them measurable according to the same criteria. They also offered the benefit of limiting assessment not just to two courses, but to two *artifacts* of those courses, making the workload imposed upon assessment officers manageable.

*II. Procedure*

Until other logistical problems associated with relative assessment could be overcome, however—how to “tag” a sample group of students whose work would be tracked from ENGL 3850 to 5650, ensuring the representativeness of that sample and eliminating selection bias, accounting for attrition and variable times to degree—an absolute model, based only on the student artifacts produced in ENGL 5650, was determined to be preferable for the trial phases of an assessment procedure. Further to eliminate bias, the procedure will be run entirely independently of ENGL 5650 instructors, whose only requirement will be to have students submit all stages of their final assignment via Canvas, or an equivalent platform with flexible access permissions.

Assessment will be conducted by the Department’s Teaching Committee, formed in 2017 with the broad mission of maintaining the Department’s teaching effectiveness (including conducting periodic, rotating classroom visits and preparing teaching reports on individual instructors for retention and promotion purposes), and overseen by the Associate Chair. At the end of each spring semester, the Associate Chair and the Department’s Undergraduate Advisor will select at random three students from each active section of ENGL 5650, download their final projects, redact their names and any other identifying information, and—together with all pertinent project guidelines issued by the instructor for the assignment—make them available to the three other members of the Teaching Committee. Based on an annual average of 3 to 4 sections of 5650 offered each Spring, this equates to between 9 and 12 student artifacts per assessment period, or if those artifacts come in multiple drafts, between 18 and 24 total documents. The Committee will evaluate the artifacts according to the Assessment Rubric (provided and discussed below), meet to discuss their findings, and the Associate Chair will prepare a final report, roughly 2-3 pages in length. That report will go to the Chair, the Office of Learning Outcomes Assessment, and (if requested) the Associate Dean of the College. If it offers recommendations, they will be discussed during the Faculty Retreat at the end of the following summer or at the next available Department meeting, whichever comes sooner. The procedure will be implemented for the first time this coming April/May 2020.

*III. Assessment Criteria*

The Department has developed a rubric by which undergraduate learning outcomes have been defined and against which their effectiveness can be assessed. The rubric spans five criteria—Argument, Analysis, Research, Writing, and Revision—which are not only central to ENGL 5650, but thanks to ENGL 5650’s capstone relation to the curriculum, universal to work in the discipline. (See Appendix Q.)

The rubric recognizes, or perhaps institutes, the following realities:

* English is a skills-based discipline, irreducible to the absorption and regurgitation of matters of fact. It consists instead in the synthesis and application of discipline-specific practices (e.g., critical reasoning, synopsis and analysis, descriptive and persuasive writing) to a wide range of textual and cultural materials.
* The best index of learning outcomes in English is the effectiveness of the work produced, which entails qualitative judgment rather than quantitative metrics—the evaluation of each criterion separately as well as of their function in concert.
* A good-faith interpretation of the assessment process should not aim to set the bar so low as to engineer uniformly superior results. In order to be meaningful, assessment should conform to the same standards by which course grades are assigned—top-down criteria that take excellence, not bare competence, as their goal. (In other words, we fully expect some student artifacts to fall short of this goal, as a necessary consequence of random selection.) Clarification of curricular objectives will also ideally encourage instructors to teach toward them, and to work with students toward meeting those goals. (Indeed, some instructors have already indicated an eagerness to publish this rubric in all their courses.)
* At the same time, because assessment will be performed by a committee rather than by the relevant course instructors, without access to the students’ full body of work, the process neither aims to nor can in all cases simply replicate the course grade the student received. We fully expect occasional conflicts between these two evaluations to occur.
* The language in which the rubric articulates learning outcome objectives is normative rather than prescriptive; it is offered only as a broad governing framework, not as an exhaustive or reductive checklist. Its interpretation will necessarily depend on the nature of the artifacts under consideration and is subject both to the discretion of the committee members and to the distinct pedagogy of individual instructors of 5650 sections. In other words, it will provide us with an imperfect but revealing picture of the variations across our curriculum, the commonalities that unify it, and its overall effectiveness in equipping students with a common core sets of skills and competencies.

We do not have a formal assessment mechanism for our graduate program. However, in line with common practice in the field, we consider the success of our graduate students on the academic job market as the best indicator of the effectiveness of our graduate program. See Section 5.4 below for the recent job placements of our PhD students.