



2008-2009 Assessment Plan Report

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT AY 2008-2009

Report Date:

School/College: College of Arts and Sciences

Department/Program: MFA in Writing Program

Person completing the Report: Catherine Brady & Aaron Shurin

1. Overview Statement: Briefly summarize the assessment activities that were undertaken this academic year, indicating:

- a. This year, we focused on programming learning outcomes 1 a and b and 2 a and b.
- b. Aaron Shurin, Catherine Brady, and members of the curriculum committees for fiction (Lewis Buzbee, Nina Schuyler, Karl Soehnlein, and Catherine Brady) and for poetry (Aaron Shurin, Norma Cole, and Brian Teare). [The nonfiction committee was postponed till next year, so that new fulltime faculty member David Vann could participate.] In addition, recommendations of the fiction and poetry curriculum committee were presented to the full faculty.

Discussion: Our primary aims were to institute curriculum committees within each genre responsible for reviewing and revising curriculum for academic rigor, to standardize assessment methods already in place, and to ensure that the curriculum focuses on achieving the learning outcomes specified in our assessment plan.

2. Please Answer the Following Questions for Each of the Student Outcomes Assessed:

a. What did you do?

Describe clearly and concisely how you assessed the learning outcomes that were evaluated this year (e.g., measures, research methods, etc.). [please use bullet points to answer this question]

Learning Goal 1, outcomes a and b.

- We will compare the writing sample submitted with the student application to 10-20 pages of the thesis and score each according to the standards of achievement provided for these learning outcomes. Because we must wait until theses have been submitted in August 2009, we will sample the work of three students in each genre (poetry, nonfiction, and fiction) in fall 2009,



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at which time the genre heads (Shurin, Brady, and Vann) will evaluate the work, selected on the basis of how the applications were ranked (high, middle, or low range).

- The poetry and fiction curriculum committees assessed curriculum and made recommendations to the faculty. The written recommendations of both committees were shared with the faculty and will be provided to any new instructors. These recommendations include specific suggestions for the workshop and several new proposed courses.
- In order to ensure variety and academic rigor, we specifically recommended to the faculty that workshops incorporate craft theory and that attention be paid to any possible overlap in reading lists in all courses within a genre. A master file of readings assigned in the previous year was made available to all instructors as they prepared their fall 2009 syllabi.
- Workshop instructors are asked to discuss in class the relationship between the creative work submitted in the course and the major project (thesis) during the course of the semester.
- The Academic Director will continue to evaluate the Program's narrative teaching evaluations for part-timers and make any necessary recommendations to instructors.
- Continued revision of our process for thesis advising (Major Project Advising) will ensure rigor and consistent standards; the process has been changed so that more of the advisers are "core faculty" in the program, either full-time faculty or members of the preferred hiring pool or part-time instructors with demonstrated records of excellent teaching.

Learning goal 2, outcomes a and b.

- The poetry and fiction curriculum committees assessed curriculum and revised course descriptions and/or proposed new courses to address identified needs. We postponed the work of the nonfiction curriculum committee so that our new full-time hire, David Vann, would be able to participate in the assessment starting in fall 2009.
- The poetry curriculum committee was satisfied with the content and description of the core courses, but felt that perhaps Visionary Poetics might alternate with another course, to offer more flexibility for staffing. The new course is called Persons of the Poem, and addresses subjectivity, identity, and address in poetry.
- The fiction curriculum committee, with many more courses to consider, made specific recommendations for academic requirements that would better serve these two goals and outcomes. The committee revised course descriptions to address weaknesses in the curriculum, in particular clear distinctions among the focus of courses and the need to ensure that reading lists for related courses do not overlap. A master file of readings assigned in the previous year is available to all instructors as they prepare syllabi (it



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includes all genre courses). The committee also proposed a new course, Point of View and Characterization, and made recommendations for special topics courses that would enhance diversity.

- The fiction curriculum committee devised a rubric for evaluating critical papers in literature seminars, which will be used for courses in all genres, to assess progress on learning goal 2, outcomes a and b. We established procedures that will allow us to sample student work (first and last critical papers) in four key fall “fundamental” courses in every genre. (The courses are the Prose of Fact (nonfiction), American Poetry and Poetics (poetry), Techniques of Long Fiction (Long fiction), and Evolution of the Short Story (short fiction.) Instructors will complete the critical paper rubric for sample papers from three students in each of the courses, and genre heads in each genre will review and make recommendations to the faculty. Rubrics will be completed for the first time in fall 2009.
- In response to committee recommendations, the faculty as a whole agreed to require critical papers that are designed to ensure competence outlined in the rubric for critical papers.

b. What did the faculty in the department or program learn?

Summarize your findings and conclusions as a result of the assessment indicating strengths and weaknesses in student learning demonstrated by this assessment.

In reviewing curriculum, we found that there was a need to specify the craft, aesthetic, or historical elements that were a key component of each course. We revised some courses so that they would offer a more detailed analysis of specific craft elements and revised others so that the focus on literary tradition and/or aesthetics was a central aspect of the course. We devised new courses to address significant craft issues not addressed in depth in other courses and provide flexibility to the curriculum. This ensures that courses cover different, but equally significant, aspects of literary education for a writer. We reached consensus on putting greater emphasis on critical writing in literature courses in keeping with standards in the field.

c. What will be done differently as a result of what was learned?

Discuss how courses and/or curricula will be changed to improve student learning as a result of the assessment. Include a discussion of how the faculty will help students overcome their weaknesses and improve their strengths.

We learned that it will be important to supervise progress within each genre rather than in an overall fashion, and changes to our governance will address this. Next year, we will also have genre heads in each genre (poetry, fiction, and nonfiction). Genre heads will review syllabi in each genre and address pedagogy in genre-specific ways, and this division of responsibility among individuals with expertise in each



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genre should help us to improve student progress on key outcomes. We learned that different literature courses in the program do not place consistent emphasis on critical writing, and we now have both this emphasis and a specific rubric in place for evaluating students' critical writing. The course changes outlined above will be implemented by fall 2009, and we will review the effectiveness of these changes next year. In the past, overlaps between the two fundamental courses in each genre, offered every other year, weakened the curriculum; by specifying clear, different emphases for each and demarcating historical periods that the reading lists should emphasize, we expect to see an improvement in the comprehensiveness of students' education. Once we are able to conduct a measure of student progress on critical papers and a measure of progress as demonstrated in the thesis, we can evaluate effectiveness and identify areas of weakness that might require additional changes to the curriculum.

3. **Attach a copy of the components of the department/program assessment plan that have been modified since its initial submission:**
 - a. Program Mission
 - b. Program Learning Goals
 - c. Program Learning Outcomes
 - d. Program Learning Rubrics aligned with outcomes
 - e. Curriculum map that shows the courses that pertain to the outcome

The only change that we have made is that in assessing student progress for learning goal 1, outcomes a and b, we will sample the writing sample submitted with the application, rather than an initial paper written within the program, because this provides a very clear-cut "start" point for assessing program effectiveness and can be centrally coordinated more easily.

Please return to: Provost Office by June 1, 2009

You can send your replies as either a Word attachment (to: marin@usfca.edu) or as a hard copy to: Provost Office, Lone Mountain Rossi Wing 4th floor.

If you have any questions, please contact: William Murry, Director of Institutional Assessment (wmurry@usfca.edu or x5486).