

## PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT AY 2008-2009

**Report Date:** June 1, 2009

School/College: Arts and Sciences

**Department/Program:** Rhetoric and Composition (Division of Communication

Studies)

**Person completing the Report:** Mark Meritt, Associate Professor

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

a. which program learning outcomes were assessed this year.

b. who in your department/program was involved in the assessment of the above learning outcomes

Our assessment activities for the current academic year began during the summer of 2008 and followed an assessment plan initiated at the start of the 2006-2007 academic year. During the summer of 2008, Rhetoric and Composition faculty members (Leslie Dennen, Devon Holmes, and Mark Meritt) read randomly selected student essays from our program's two freshman composition sequences: RC 110-120 (Written Communication I and II) and RC 130-131 (Written and Oral Communication I and II). Two students were randomly selected from each section of RC 110 and RC 130 in the fall of 2007. Those students' RC 110 instructors were asked to submit copies of the first formal essays for the course written by those students that term. During the following spring (2008), those same students' instructors were asked to submit copies of the longest formal essays turned written by the students during that term. Therefore, from each student we hoped to collect the first essay written during his/her first term of composition and a long essay written late during his/her second term.

We intended to use these essays as data to assess student progress toward four of the five Core Area A2 learning outcomes. The four outcomes we hoped to assess were as follows:

- 1) Critical analysis of academic discourse: Students critically analyze linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in long and complex texts from a variety of genres, subjects, and fields.
- 2) Integrating multiple academic sources: Students incorporate multiple texts of length and complexity within a unified argumentative essay, addressing connections and differences among them.
- 3) Academic research: Students develop sophisticated research questions and compose substantial arguments in response to those questions, incorporating



- extensive independent library research and demonstrating mastery of standard academic documentation modes.
- 4) Style: Students edit their own prose to achieve a clear and mature writing style in keeping with the conventions of academic and/or professional discourse.

Each essay was scored by two readers, each of whom assigned a numerical score on a scale of 0 to 3 for each outcome. The two scores were added to form a composite score (from 0 to 6) measuring performance on each of the four outcomes. This scoring allowed us to compare performance on first-semester (110 and 130) papers with performance on second-semester (120 and 131) papers in terms of each outcome in order to determine whether our sample students as a whole made measurable progress in each of the four outcome areas over the course of their first-year writing courses. Again, this process mirrored the one followed during the 2006-2007 academic year. As will be discussed below and as seen in more detail in the attached reports, while students appeared to make substantial progress (and perhaps truly did), due to design problems our assessment method lacked sufficient validity for this conclusion to be drawn.

We did not assess student progress on our fifth learning outcome, "Revision," which we define in terms of the following behavior: "Students develop their own revision strategies for extending and enriching early drafts and for producing polished advanced academic writing." Since we did not obtain draft or first versions of each essay, we were unable to assess revision meaningfully.

During this past academic year (2008-2009), we again collected samples from sections of RHET 110-120 and 130-131. This summer, Mark Meritt, Devon Holmes, and Leslie Dennen will again read and score these samples, and Meritt will tabulate and discuss the results in a full report. Finally, Rhetoric and Composition faculty are currently developing what we hope will be a more thorough and more valid assessment process for the 2009-2010 academic year (see attached draft of proposal).

# 2. Please Answers 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]

- We collected randomly selected pairs sample essays from the beginning and end of our two first-year composition sequences (RHET 110-120 and RHET 130-131) from the 2007-2008 academic year.
- Each essay was read and scored by two readers, producing a composite score on a 0 to 6 scale for each of the four outcomes (6 being the high score indicating evidence of mastery of the outcome).
- For each course (110, 120, 130, 131), average scores for each outcome were calculated.



• For each outcome, average scores for first and second-semester courses were compared to measure progress or lack of progress toward the outcome in question. (For example, the average 110 score for "style" was compared to the average 120 score for the same outcome.)

## 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.

For both the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years, our reading and subsequent calculations seemed to suggest progress toward most learning outcomes in both course sequences, particularly for outcomes #2 and #3 ("integrating sources" and "academic research"). For the 2007-2008 year, progress was particularly marked in the 130-131 sequence. However, the lower scores in the 110-120 sequence were of limited validity since our sample pool was extremely small due to poor collection efforts. Scores for outcome #1 ("critical analysis") over the sequences remained relatively stable, though these scores are difficult to interpret as the essays compared from the first and second-semester sequences responded to very different assignments, some of which called for textual analysis and some of which did not.

While we hope that the results indicating progress in this assessment are at least somewhat valid, we also feel that the validity and rigor of our assessment method can be significantly improved. It was difficult to determine limitations in our student learning, as the assessment method required us to compare sample essays that were very dissimilar and therefore not fruitfully evaluated according to similar criteria. (See attached reports for a fuller discussion of this problem). As a result (and as noted above), we plan to design and implement a more thorough and accurate means of assessment.

## 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.

While we have not yet conceived any major curricular changes as a result of our assessment, we have re-written our assignment guidelines to make clearer to faculty the kind of work our students should be asked to complete. For example, course guidelines for both RHET 110-120 and RHET 130-131 have been re-written to indicate much more clearly that instructors should be assigning argumentative and analytical writing tasks that require extensive response to and incorporation of readings and other source materials.

Again, our major plan is to implement an assessment program that will allow us to determine much more meaningfully the degree to which our students are progressing toward our core learning outcomes. More specifically, we hope to collect a broader range of sample essays from each student to gain a fuller and deeper sense of each student's progress toward our core learning



outcomes. In addition, we plan to develop a separate assessment plan to measure student progress in the practice of revision (outcome #5). Such an assessment will require the collection of draft and final versions of sample student work. Finally, we are developing a plan for assessing transfer of student learning from first-year composition to writing tasks in other undergraduate courses. Our findings in these new assessment programs will lead possibly to revision of our core learning outcomes, further revision of assignment guidelines, and perhaps even significant revision of the content of our freshman writing 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

We have made no modifications of the above elements at this point. However, we are, as noted above, in the process of discussing and refining a newly proposed assessment plan for 2009-2010. This more thorough proposal will, we hope, produce more valid results that will allow us to make more meaningful evidence-based changes to our curriculum. Attached is a draft of the assessment proposal, along with copies of the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 assessment reports.