Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment

ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment

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Executive Summary

THE report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment distills the advice of leading assessment experts and offers concrete suggestions for implementing a useful and streamlined assessment program in postsecondary departments of English. Assessment takes time, but it need not be overwhelming if departments approach it as a collaborative project based on shared academic values and a commitment to student learning. The report recommends that departments strive to keep it uncomplicated by focusing on a limited number of clearly defined outcomes. The report outlines a problem- and inquiry-based approach whereby departments develop learning goals and generate questions about what and how English majors are learning. This approach can move assessment beyond data collection and make it part of a meaningful curricular conversation.

Learning outcomes most productively emerge from the values of a department. Faculty discussions clarifying those values are a good first step, after which faculty members can begin identifying desirable goals and learning outcomes connected to those values. By coming to consensus on a select list of learning outcomes, a department engages in the kind of critical and self-reflective work about its values and practices that defines teaching as a scholarly act and that can help a department put student learning at the center. Ideally, assessment activities are learning activities for students that are embedded in the work of a program and do not require separate actions by either faculty members or students. The committee suggests that departments devise measures that rely on a reasonably small number of easily collectible samples of student work that are not produced by students specifically for the purposes of assessment. Departments are also encouraged to use those measures to devise practical steps aimed at improving student learning. A conversation in the department about its assessment report is an important step in the process, which is most useful when ongoing.

The committee's report includes examples of values, outcomes statements, direct and indirect measures, and reporting templates as well as an annotated bibliography and a brief case study of one department's assessment process. It also offers faculty members a realistic understanding of how assessment is situated in higher education, attempting to get beyond some of the myths that hinder productive action while acknowledging the genuine challenges. The report shows that effective and efficient assessment processes can benefit students, instructors, departments, and the profession as a whole.

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Charge to the Committee

The Executive Committee of the Association of Departments of English (ADE) charged the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment with writing a report on learning-outcomes assessment in English departments that included implementable recommendations. The ad hoc committee was asked to gather assessment plans from programs, to compare those plans with the requirements established by administrators, state governments, and accrediting agencies, to offer recommendations for helping departments develop plans that meet accreditors' requirements, to distinguish between the specific outcomes sought (e.g., ability to cite sources correctly) and their ancillary beneficial side effects (e.g., civic virtue), to explore how departments use their assessment plans to improve teaching, and to identify best practices for assessment.

Introduction

In 1996, when the last ADE report on assessment was published, about twenty-five percent of English departments surveyed indicated that they were not being assessed ("Report" 4). In contrast, by 2010 an informal survey showed that only two percent of ADE-member departments reported having no assessment program and no plan to devise one (Heiland and Rosenthal, Introduction 9). The responses the ad hoc committee received to its invitation to department chairs to share their assessment plans (fifty-six departments responded; twenty-seven shared full assessment reports), the discussions at the 2012 and 2013 ADE Summer Seminars, and recent publications on assessment, such as the collection of essays edited by Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal, show that many English departments are struggling with a variety of assessment-related issues, including faculty skepticism. Since assessment is being widely undertaken, the question now is, How can assessment best be practiced?

Members of the committee, despite varying experiences with and attitudes toward assessment, found many areas of agreement. Assessment is driven by both local, department-specific circumstances and a broad context of disciplinary directions, institutional expectations, accreditation requirements, and, for public institutions, state mandates. English departments will be wise to plan their assessment activities with both the local and broad contexts in mind. Faculty members engaged in assessment will want to have a clear understanding of the expectations not only of their own institutions but also of regional accreditors, and those expectations can vary considerably. Two documents that outline these expectations are the most recent accreditation report of an institution and an institution's formal response to that report.

Assessment is often seen as tedious and as an intrusive threat to a discipline's integrity. The committee nonetheless encourages faculty members to take control of the assessment process to the fullest extent possible. Departments can do much

to gear assessment toward the improvement of learning, even when administrators are focused on accountability. Martha L. A. Stassen, president of the New England Educational Assessment Network, notes that "accountability" and "assessment" are not "interchangeable terms" (137). Conflating accountability with assessment obscures how assessment in fact dovetails with faculty members' interest in student achievement and student engagement in writing, literature, and cultural studies. Department leaders sometimes interpret administrative directives to assess as a demand for accountability and posit an ideological link to the national standardization of elementary and secondary school curricula. But this interpretation is rooted in a mistaken understanding of the role of accreditors.

Accreditation at the college and university level is a form of peer review. Accrediting agencies are not government agencies; they are funded by the institutions of higher education that voluntarily agree to meet certain standards. As Rosemary G. Feal, David Laurence, and Stephen Olsen explain in "Where Has Assessment Been in the Modern Language Association? A Disciplinary Perspective," accrediting agencies' insistence that all institutions have procedures for documenting student learning is not an *external* demand. It is the consequence of higher education's success in establishing a system of voluntary accreditation in response to a legislative crusade for direct governmental intervention in postsecondary institutions. During the 1992 congressional debate about reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, some members of Congress advocated placing institutions of higher learning under direct governmental supervision if they wished to remain eligible for Title IV federal student loan and grant programs. Others, however, proposed a more moderate reform: that institutions receiving federal student loan and grant money "document that the educational programs students undertook were actually delivering the education advertised" (Feal, Laurence, and Olsen 60). As Feal, Laurence, and Olsen point out, "[b]y agreeing to implement assessment and documentation of student learning outcomes as part of the accreditation process, higher education's voluntary accreditation system succeeded in preserving the tie between accreditation and eligibility for institutions to participate in Title IV student-aid programs" (60–61). In other words, assessment in higher education is similar to the traditional and long-standing ways in which professors have held themselves accountable to their disciplines and fields: through peer review of scholarly publications, professional presentations that invite discussion and critique, and curricular reform. As a form of internal review, assessment resembles these processes more than it does the external regulation of elementary and secondary education through standardized testing.

The misunderstanding of assessment as an external demand—one that is, at best, an additional burden and, at worst, a threat to the survival of the discipline—tends to drown out the more relevant discussion of student learning. Assessment for learning is rooted in a commitment to improving programs, student learning in those programs, and instruction in support of those programs. The committee thus encourages those engaged in assessment to understand it in the context of the voluntary accreditation system. This follows the advice of Peggy L. Maki, who suggests that departments adopt a strategy to align their goals with those of their institutions and the agencies with which institutions partner and by which they are accredited (88).

Moreover, practices of assessment benefit by being discipline-specific. As Heiland and Rosenthal point out in their introduction to *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*, in the three decades since the assessment movement began, comparatively little attention has been given to discipline-specific strategies for assessment, and the result is that the conversation about assessment often seems unconnected to teachers' subject areas (10). Even Richard J. Shavelson, a cocreator of the College Learning Assessment, bemoans the few existing measures of "domain-specific knowledge" (14) and asserts that such knowledge is underassessed (153). This report therefore focuses on how to assess an English department, attending most closely to the undergraduate major in English, including programs within English departments such as cultural studies, media studies, and rhetoric, among others.[1] It makes recommendations for implementing a useful assessment program designed to improve student learning, regardless of administrative demands for accountability.

From Values to Outcomes

Outcome goals should be decided on by the department. Although faculty members in some disciplines, such as business, education, and engineering, must demonstrate the achievement of certain outcomes to their professional societies, faculty members in English often have the autonomy to let the values of their department shape learning outcomes.[2] When English departments are given learning-outcomes goals by their institution's administration, the committee encourages faculty members to participate fully in the processes available for helping create those goals. Although most programs would not be thinking about outcomes assessment without the demands of accountability, focusing on accountability will create confusion and lead to limited satisfaction with the process. Either departments will produce just enough information to avoid penalties, or they will unreflectively follow administrative direction. In the first case, the assessment process will be a waste of time, generating work without yielding substantive results. In the second, departments forfeit their values. The committee advocates a different path, in which departments take ownership of the process and shape it to suit their discipline-specific learning needs.

Learning outcomes are best developed collaboratively (Maki 88). It may be tempting for a department chair or assessment committee to try to save others time and trouble by developing learning outcomes for the department, but the committee urges departments to resist that temptation. Of course, many faculty members may initially have difficulty seeing the department's teaching activity from a collective point of view—after all, faculty members are used to thinking about the classroom as the private domain and personal expression of the individual instructor. A useful first step in collaboration is to identify the department's shared values. It may be helpful to understand that English departments hold some values in common with one another. The assessment materials reviewed by the committee show that English departments tend to value the following for their students:

- ability to closely read, critically analyze, and make arguments rooted in disciplinary understandings of evidence

- knowledge of genres and literary history and an understanding that cultural and historical contexts are important to consider when reading texts
- commitment to diversity (of authors, perspectives, and literary traditions), demonstrated—for example, in continuous engagement with works from the past and in advocacy for the humanities in society
- excellence in writing and facility with terms and methods of critical analysis and synthesis—for example, using evidence deftly to advance an argument; integrating and citing source materials with appropriate documentation; drafting, revising, and editing to achieve clear cohesive arguments; critically engaging with one's own and others' ideas to produce new and nuanced interpretations

These common values can help provide the basis for learning outcomes.

Naming Outcomes

After a department has a conversation about values and names several of its most important ones, it can begin identifying desirable goals and learning outcomes connected to those values. By discussing, debating, and achieving consensus on a select list of learning goals, a department engages in the kind of critical and self-reflective work about its values and practices that defines teaching as a scholarly act. As Rosenthal explains, the process invites faculty members to think "deeply and systematically about what we want students to learn from literary study, about how we hope they develop as they move through our programs, about what kinds of capacities we would like them to develop, and about what kinds of inquiry they should become capable of pursuing" (189). Composing outcomes statements also gives a department the opportunity to turn the "tacit knowledge" forming the content and structure of the English major into "explicit standards that can guide faculty and students alike in the development of intellectual and practical capabilities" (Schneider 33). Students learn better when the teaching they receive is "purposeful, coherent, and integrated" (Suskie 127). Furthermore, students with less prior exposure to English-language arts, such as first-generation college students or those who attended underfunded K–12 schools, are especially likely to benefit from an explicit, coherent program of study. In other words, learning expectations left unspecified give advantage to students from socioeconomic groups in which those unstated standards are already part of a familiar network of practices and expectations. All students benefit from knowing the values and expectations of their programs, not just those of the professors in whose courses they enroll.

When beginning the process for the first time, faculty members engaging in assessment may find it helpful to see a sample of outcomes statements as well as to read guidelines written by assessment experts (see app. A). Although many assessment plans are elaborate and extensive, the committee strongly recommends that departments strive to clearly state a select number of outcomes (see the examples in app. B). In her *Assessing for Learning*, Maki discusses the characteristics of learning-outcomes statements and recommends developing goals that are not only meaningful and measurable through qualitative or quantitative methods but also manageable by

nonexperts. One of the main strategies for keeping assessment "authentic"—that is, a process from which departments can truly learn and through which they can improve student learning—is to keep it as uncomplicated as possible.

Keeping assessment uncomplicated is more easily done when departments realize that the learning-outcomes statement is not the only way to demonstrate the uses and value of an English degree. Since learning-outcomes statements draw on evidence and respond to mandates that vary, and since they are developed by teachers with different pedagogical approaches, it would be impossible for English departments to forge statements that coalesce all their nuanced, disparate goals. The goals that are included need not become the sole focus of students and faculty members. To tell their story, departments can also draw on the many means already at their disposal—newsletters, Web sites, public readings, and so on.

The committee recommends beginning the process of writing the outcomes statement by having department members identify a genuine problem that needs to be solved. Many experts describe three steps in outcomes assessment: naming outcomes, measuring them, and taking action. Maki, however, suggests an additional step: asking an "open-ended research or study question" (136). Asking such a question can shift the entire endeavor from a linear to a dialectical model, whereby the driving issues that most interest a faculty affect decisions about the design of the assessment plan each step of the way (135). This problem-based model can help avoid excessive focus on "numbers, percentages, national benchmarks, percentiles and pass rates" (124).

To illustrate the process of moving from values to burning question to outcomes statement, let us consider the example of a department that lists this goal among its values: understanding the uses of cultural and historical contexts to form interpretations. Imagine that in the conversation about shared values, some faculty members express doubt that most students adequately understand the uses of cultural and historical contexts when analyzing a literary text. The department might decide to use assessment to determine whether and how the work students do as they progress through the program demonstrates increasing proficiency in contextualization. The next step would be to devise an outcomes statement meant to capture that understanding. Learning-outcomes statements, as Maki notes, "identify what students should be able to demonstrate, represent, or produce because of what and how they have learned at the institution or in a program. That is, they translate learning into actions . . . from which observers can draw inferences about the depth and breadth of student learning" (89). A possible outcomes statement for this value could be, "Students will be able to analyze literary texts in their historical and cultural contexts." A review of student work can reveal the extent to which the stated expectation is being fulfilled; identifying gaps or problems in the student work can then lead to departmental action.

Once the department has agreed on a set of learning outcomes, the committee recommends sharing those outcomes statements not only with faculty members but also with students to create a shared sense of purpose. Most important, though, making outcomes statements public gives students in the program access to information that can be useful to them and that can help them understand their progress in a broader context.

Measuring Outcomes

Dylan Wiliam sounds the caution that we should not "start out with the intention of making the important measurable, and end up making the measurable important" (166). This difficulty has led some departments to turn to standardized tests, such as the GRE or Praxis subject tests, or to develop tasks to be assigned specifically for assessment, but such measures are of limited use for examining a program. A department's conversation about outcomes should consider measurements, but the limitations of measurement need not drive the outcomes. On the one hand, some outcomes may not be measurable by just one method; on the other, it is neither necessary nor helpful for a department to attempt to measure everything that is measurable. Assessment plans show that some departments overcomplicate assessment by measuring all that they can. To avoid excessive data gathering, departments might consider using grades as their measurements, especially since faculty members already grade papers and submit final grades for students. But grades cannot be the sole measure.

The committee suggests that departments devise measures that rely on a reasonably small number of easily collectible samples of student work. They should result from students' learning activities (Wiliam 177), and they should not be produced specifically for the purposes of assessment. For instance, anonymized final essays from a department's capstone courses could be used. Many assessment experts, however, recommend using portfolios of student writing rather than single papers. Most learning management systems, such as *Blackboard, Canvas, and Desire2Learn*, offer a portfolio option, which makes it fairly simple to collect student work done over the course of a semester or an even longer period.

In departments with a large number of majors, even using final papers from capstone courses could supply an overwhelming amount of material. However, there are ways to make the process manageable. First, assessment committees can cull a randomly chosen, representative sample from the materials collected. Second, instead of measuring every outcome every assessment cycle, they can focus on one or two outcomes (Walvoord 60). If the department has chosen to follow Maki's problem-based model, that focus can be derived from the question posed.

Demonstrating how a single outcome can be measured might be useful here. Many of the assessment plans reviewed by the committee include an outcome about students' use of secondary sources—for example, "Students will be able to incorporate secondary sources and research materials into literary analysis and employ correct MLA style." (Outcomes in this category seem to stem from the widely shared value that students should be able to draw on multiple texts to make a critical argument.) Departments might begin developing their measurements by discussing every element of the learning outcome: What would a good use of secondary sources or research materials demonstrate? What are the elements of a strong literary analysis that draws on secondary sources? How might a student demonstrate understanding of MLA style? Do students improve in their use of research materials across their years in the program? If so, what might cause the improvement—work in particular courses or just practice across time? At what course level or levels does the department teach students how to use such materials?

Departments will next want to measure this outcome. Typically, they use a combination of direct and indirect measures. Direct measures analyze examples of student work for evidence of learning. Indirect measures analyze indicators that learning has taken place—such as self-assessments, student surveys, and graduate school admission rates—but do not measure learning itself. Institutions generally require direct measures, but departments may also find indirect measures informative. A scale of measurement will need to be developed. It need not be finely calibrated; using just three categories—such as novice, proficient, and highly proficient or unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and outstanding—suffices (see app. C for an example of how to apply categories). For this outcome, a department might have one direct measure (e.g., the papers or portfolios) and one indirect measure (e.g., a survey question posed to graduating seniors about how well the program helped them learn to "incorporate secondary sources and research materials into literary analysis and employ correct MLA style"). If the department is collecting portfolios or materials from courses at different levels, it would be possible to measure this outcome at different stages of students' progress through the program.[3]

The direct measure might have several rubrics, each focused on a single component of the outcome. For instance, one rubric might be "ability to incorporate secondary sources into analysis," with the following scoring guidelines:

> *Unsatisfactory*: The writing sample does not demonstrate an ability to incorporate secondary sources and research materials into the analysis; it draws on no secondary sources, uses secondary sources only cursorily, or uses inappropriate sources (e.g., articles from non-peer-reviewed journals).
> *Satisfactory*: The writing sample demonstrates the ability to incorporate appropriate secondary sources and research materials into the analysis in ways that begin to engage with a source's evidence in relation to the writer's argument; the sample also indicates some selectivity in terms of the sources chosen for an academic audience.
> *Outstanding*: The writing sample demonstrates an exceptional ability to select and incorporate appropriate secondary sources and research materials by engaging critically and fully with a source's evidence in relation to the writer's argument and by integrating the source fully into the paper.

Let's imagine that only fifty percent of students at the senior level score satisfactory or outstanding on the direct measure of this outcome, but on the indirect measure (the survey question) ninety percent claim that the program did a satisfactory or outstanding job of teaching them how to incorporate secondary sources and research materials into literary analysis and use MLA style correctly. The department would then want to discuss the gap between students' actual and perceived achievement on this measure and determine how to improve students' learning.

Acting on Assessment Results

The purpose of gathering and analyzing information about student learning in the manner described above is action (Walvoord 4). When the department in the

example given above discusses how to close the gap between students' actual and perceived achievement as researchers, the action stage is under way. In *Assessment Clear and Simple*, Barbara E. Walvoord advises that the following three questions will help departments determine what action to take: "What is most important?," "Which areas show the greatest problems with learning?," and "What is feasible?" (69). A department can answer these questions while considering the three common areas for change: curricular requirements and structure, surrounding policies and funding formulas, and faculty development (5). Looking at specific areas can help develop a balanced plan for action that does not ask too much of any subset of the faculty and that offers opportunities for staging the actions.

In the example at hand, a department could focus action in various ways. If the discussion determined that learning to enter the conversation as a literary critic through active engagement with critical sources is both more important and more difficult for students to achieve than mastering MLA style, the department might focus on curriculum change and faculty development in relation to that change. Or the department might decide to adopt a common text on literary analysis and writing that would incorporate secondary sources for its introductory literature course and that faculty members in upper-level courses could also use and reference. By using this text across their courses, English majors would have the opportunity to see that the program as a whole valued this capability; this alone could lead to more specific understanding and realistic assessment by students of their own degree of accomplishment. A department could also administer midterm self-assessments, enabling faculty members to learn how students perceive their work with sources along with other course outcomes in time to close the gap. Finally, faculty workshops could be developed on effective ways to teach students how to work with sources in the writing they do for reading-intensive courses. In these ways, a department can take focused, modest action in response to a matter it cares about.

Departments should follow up to check the effectiveness of actions they take, keeping in mind that the ability to evaluate effectiveness varies by action. Where an important change seems warranted, the difficulty of evaluating it need not be an impediment. For instance, a department might decide to reduce the number of readings in its introductory course so that instructors can spend more time on what students can do with the readings, even though the effects of this change might be hard to evaluate through direct evidence. Nevertheless, the faculty may deem this the right direction to take not only because of the problems uncovered through assessment but also because of their extensive experience teaching this course. Such action is worthwhile even if the evidence for whether it is working is limited. When assessment enables a department to forge a shared commitment to teaching as a critical and responsive practice for the improvement of student learning, it *is* working.

Reporting

The way that departments report their assessment process can affect the usefulness of the project and the amount of time it requires. Many departments are obligated to

use forms developed by their institution. If an institutional form has been adopted, the committee encourages departments to consider whether the form adequately expresses their assessment process. Ideally, the institutional form should be able to capture the provisional nature of outcome assessment, to permit space for describing how a department has responded to what it has found, and to account for narrative or qualitative as well as numerical or quantitative information. If the form is inadequate, the committee encourages departments to suggest alternatives (a meeting with the institution's assessment coordinator or with the dean may be useful). If a compromise cannot be negotiated, departments should consider creating a second form for internal use.

The first recipients of a department's assessment report should be members of the department. Assessment is useless if it ends with a report that remains unread and undiscussed by those who should be most interested in it. Thus a departmental conversation about the assessment report is an important step in the process. The committee recommends devoting at least a portion of a department meeting to discussing the report and reaching agreement on steps to be taken in response to its findings.

Myths and Concerns about Assessment

Any department setting up an assessment program will face anxieties, often generated by misunderstandings, and genuine, well-informed concerns. Unacknowledged and unaddressed, misunderstandings can blossom into deep resistance to assessment. Some of the most common myths gleaned from both published articles and university assessment pages include the following:[4]

Grades suffice as assessment. Grades do not constitute programmatic assessment or offer adequate feedback on what instructors might do to improve and enhance students' learning. Furthermore, learning is not the sole criterion for grades; a student's promptness or an instructor's grading philosophy, for example, also factors in. Few would assume that the greatest learning in a department can always be found in the courses that give the highest grades. Moreover, grades are typically assignment-specific. Outcomes are more general and reveal mastery of broader concepts and skills.

Assessment isn't necessary since programs are doing fine without it. Curriculum revisions and program reviews routinely happen within departments for various purposes and not because a department is functioning poorly. This same kind of review can provide the basis for a well-planned assessment program that aims to enhance student learning and that is rooted in a department's shared values. Most thoughtful and responsive departments and faculty members continually seek ways to realize and document the effectiveness and relevance of learning materials and instruction practices.

Assessment requires resources and specialized expertise; departments need to hire a specialist to take charge of assessment and should refuse to go forward until the department has been given adequate resources and staff. Assessment is best undertaken as a collaborative activity among faculty members, not handled entirely by a single faculty or staff member or handed off to an outside person. An "insider" perspective can guide, sustain, and value ongoing assessment. More important, if the focus remains on helping students and on helping faculty members better serve students through classroom

instruction, faculty members will be more willing to undertake assessment, and the process will be less onerous. Undoubtedly, assessment is time-consuming work, and many departments would benefit from having additional staff or released time to help get the work done. However, putting assessment off until institutional administrators make additional resources available is likely to result in a department's receiving fewer resources, not more. Assessment is important to most upper administrators, who tend to provide additional resources to reward success, not to forestall failure. Departments that make a good-faith effort to design and carry out meaningful assessments may find themselves in a better position to argue for resources.

No one will care about the assessment process. Faculty members already care about what students are learning. Other stakeholders—parents, students, legislators, other institutions, and administrators—also care about what students learn. Assessment can help determine what is being learned and how students are learning. Assessment also allows English departments to self-reflect and thus to improve. If education is to serve a greater public and individual good, what goes on in classrooms qualitatively and quantitatively matters. As students and parents look at a college experience as an investment, learning outcomes can help fully describe what students have learned. Assessment can make concrete the many ways that humanities as a discipline and a degree in English enrich students' lives in the classroom and beyond.

Conclusion

A survey of the assessment plans sent to this committee from ADE-member departments suggests the following:

- The size of a program has minimal effect on strategies for outcomes assessment.
- Programs tend to identify two to six assessable outcomes.
- Some institutions require course- and program-level assessment.
- Many programs use direct and indirect measures of assessment, although some use only direct measures.
- Many programs, regardless of level, use exit surveys of graduating students as an indirect measure of success.
- Most programs link performance standards to a benchmark completion rate, but that rate varies by institution.
- Portfolio assessment might involve two or three readers evaluating many student portfolios or many readers evaluating a small sample of student portfolios.
- When writing skill is an outcome, whether measured by a single assessment or by a portfolio, most programs standardize evaluation using a departmental rubric.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for assessing program outcomes. Indeed, the most common pattern that emerged from our sample was that departments use forms to report learning outcomes (see app. E for two successful forms). The programs that document assessment measures and performance criteria on a standardized form have been able to communicate their assessment results with fewer caveats and less discussion than those that rely on narrative for explanation.

One of the central concerns about assessment is that it is time-consuming. Indeed it is, but it need not be overwhelmingly so if departments approach assessment as a collaborative project based on shared academic values and commitment to student learning. What often becomes more time-consuming than assessment is faculty members' wrangling about basic premises, such as whether assessment is necessary at all. A department that takes assessment seriously and that wants to learn from it may well need to undertake some restructuring of committee assignments and other responsibilities to share the labor. Setting up the assessment process—talking about values, agreeing on departmental goals, devising outcomes statements, figuring out how to measure those outcomes, deciding what to do about results—is not the work of a single department meeting or even perhaps of a single semester. Assessment, once the process is set up, is ongoing and recursive, with no final step. It is work, but work with many potential benefits.[5]

Members of the committee are convinced that assessment is useful work that holds the promise of improving students' experiences in English programs. Further, tackling assessment together may reinvigorate a department's sense of itself as a group dedicated to student learning and committed to a shared enterprise. Committee members have heard story after story from chairs whose departments went into assessment resistant to the core—"kicking and screaming" was the most frequent description—but that emerged from the process pleased with the results and excited about new possibilities for teaching and learning that arose from assessment projects. Several of us have such stories about our own departments. The ADE Summer Seminars for chairs are especially good resources for those working on assessment projects. At the 2008 ADE Summer Seminar in Sante Fe, Jeffrey Smitten, of Utah State University, spoke about his department's collective work in assessing undergraduate literary studies, detailing his "slow realization of how deeply woven into the discipline of literary studies the practice of assessment ought to be." Smitten's presentation emphasized his growing understanding that "assessment is the means by which we form our discipline." The process of negotiating values and learning outcomes is the way for a department to create a coherent program from what might otherwise seem (or even be) a random assemblage of discrete courses. That process also may well result in a department that has a shared sense of itself as a collective body, which may in turn improve the way the department functions in myriad other areas in which collectively made decisions are necessary.

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Notes

1. This report does not address first-year composition, only the English major.

2. Some professional organizations in the humanities, of course, have offered suggestions about assessment to their membership. The American Historical Association (AHA), for example, has been engaged in a "tuning project," in which leaders and members of the AHA have been meeting to discuss the skills and knowledge that history majors should be able to demonstrate by the end of their programs. Other professional societies representing liberal arts disciplines have posted outcome goals for undergraduate majors on their Web sites. A listing of these has been collected by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment and posted on its Web site (http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/CollegesUniversityPrograms.html).

3. Appendix D provides an example of an indirect measure in the form of a student survey; see also SALG (Student Assessment of Their Learning Gains) for example survey templates (http://www.salgsite.org).

4. See, e.g., Daniels, Berglund, Pears, and Fincher; *Program Learning Outcomes Assessment Handbook*; "Assessment Myths and Realities"; and "Assessment Myths."

5. Appendix F, a case study of one department's progress through the assessment process—part of a presentation given by John Bean at the 2008 ADE Summer Seminar—demonstrates some of those benefits.

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Wiliam, Dylan. "An Overview of the Relationship between Assessment and the Curriculum." *Curriculum and Assessment*. Ed. David Scott. Westport: Ablex, 2001. 165–81. Print.

Appendix A

Annotated Bibliography

Finley, Ashley. *Making Progress? What We Know about the Achievement of Liberal Education Outcomes*. Washington: Assn. of Amer. Colls. and Univs., 2012. Print.

This thirty-five-page booklet is part of an ongoing series devoted to concretizing principles that demonstrate the value of liberal arts education. With chapters devoted to students' self-reports, self-perception, and performance; faculty intentions and student aspirations; and national initiatives around learning outcomes, the greatest strength of this resource is its format—short chapters and accessible language. While the booklet offers support generally for identifying outcomes for student learning—intellectual and practical skills—some of the other outcomes, like those involving personal and social responsibility, are more difficult to assess and measure.

Heiland, Donna, and Laura J. Rosenthal, eds. *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*. New York: Teagle, 2011. Print, Web. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/disciplinaryassessment/>.

This book, freely available on the Teagle Foundation Web site, is a collection of essays that explore various aspects of assessment specific to literary study, raising questions about the role of particular disciplines in the assessment movement. In particular, it focuses on the most pertinent question to outcomes assessment in this disciplinary context: that is, can we capture the outcomes that we care about the most? Various scholars tackle this question through critical investigation and particular case studies, reaching a wide range of conclusions. The volume aims to start a conversation about assessment in our field. It also provides a historical perspective on assessment, which was part of a progressive educational movement before it became entangled in bureaucratic demands.

Maki, Peggy L. *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment across the Institution*. 2nd ed. Sterling: Stylus, 2010. Print.

Maki's comprehensive guide provides case studies that can help departments construct thoughtful assessment projects for deep inquiry into learning.

"Tuning the History Discipline in the United States." *American Historical Association*. AHA, 2013. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <http://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/current-projects/tuning>.

"The American Historical Association has begun a nationwide, faculty-led project to articulate the disciplinary core of historical study and to define what a student should understand and be able to do at the completion of a history degree program. This AHA project brings together accomplished history faculty from more than sixty institutions across the country. These faculty participants are working together to develop common language that communicates to a broad audience the significance and value of a history degree." This project is worth looking at as a model of how another professional organization in the humanities is addressing not only

learning outcomes for their majors but also the value of a humanities field to under-graduates, graduate students, and the general public.

Walvoord, Barbara E. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. San Francisco: Jossey, 2004. Print.

While not specific to any discipline, Walvoord's book is an excellent introduction to the practical aspects of assessment. Walvoord offers sound advice on assessment for institutions, departments, and general education. Even as she looks for ways to keep assessment tied to the enhancement of student learning, she remains sensitive to faculty workload. This book is highly recommended as a place to start for anyone new to assessment.

Walvoord, Barbara E. "How to Construct a Simple, Sensible, Useful Departmental Assessment Process." *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*. Ed. Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal. New York: Teagle, 2011. 335–52. Print.

This article tailors the advice in *Assessment Clear and Simple* to English department concerns and provides discipline-specific examples.

Appendix B

Sample Outcomes Statements

English Studies Reading and Writing Goals

Students will read attentively, closely, and critically, effectively using primary texts through quotation and internal reference, drawing conclusions and generalities beyond a given text, and offering a clear critical approach in interpreting texts.

Students will be able to state clearly the central themes, concepts, and ideas governing a work of literature and then, as a separate but related act, to evaluate their literary importance or cultural significance.

Students will develop familiarity with major periods and movements and with the influence of previous trends and styles on later authors and texts.

Students will understand the major characteristics of the dominant genres (poetry, fiction, and drama) and use those characteristics to analyze individual examples.

Students will demonstrate a clear understanding of primary literary texts and a familiarity with the culture, genre, and place in literary history from which they come.

Students will recognize and distinguish major genres and subgenres of literature.

Students will understand literature in English as a body of knowledge open to multiple interpretations.

Students will demonstrate their ability to identify the major theoretical schools and apply those approaches to a variety of texts.

Students will develop familiarity with major theoretical trends and schools of literary criticism and understand how they impact the critical reception of texts and authors.

Students will use appropriate literary and linguistic theory in discussing the assigned texts.

Students will respond to a literary text in a way that reflects an awareness of aesthetic values, historical context, ideological orientation, and critical approach.

Students will demonstrate the role of context(s) in production, reception, and transmission of literary and cultural texts (across periods, histories, geographic or national spaces, and cultural differences).

Students will demonstrate their knowledge of the historical development of the English language.

Students will write thoughtfully, coherently, and persuasively:
- Student establishes a central point or focus.
- Student effectively uses evidence to support and develop the central point.
- Student develops points in argument in an orderly manner.
- Student demonstrates appropriate writing mechanics.

Students will develop and challenge their thinking through scholarly research:

- Student clearly delineates complex relationships among ideas.
- Student demonstrates scholarly engagement with secondary sources.
- Student clearly summarizes and paraphrases secondary texts.
- Student cites sources correctly.

Students in an undergraduate literature concentration will demonstrate proficiency in the analysis of literary and cultural texts (including traditional written, oral, and visual as well as Web-based texts).

Students will demonstrate that they can develop a thesis and sustain an argument that supports that thesis.

Students will be able to write clear, grammatically consistent, and rhetorically effective papers, driven by a thesis and sustained by an ordered, coherent argument or sequence of ideas.

Students will demonstrate writing skills at the stylistic, structural, and grammatical levels.

Students will be able to perform a literary close reading and demonstrate the ability to interpret literary texts by thoughtfully integrating quoted passages into the larger argumentative claims of an essay.

Students will conduct research and present the results in appropriate written form.

English majors will be able to manage sophisticated writing and research projects, planning, documenting, completing, and assessing work on time and within the constraints of the project.

Students will support their literary research with access to academic information resources provided by the library and will include both in-text citations and a bibliography of sources that adheres to the MLA style of documentation.

Students will become skilled in using appropriate technologies and research methods.

Appendix C

Literature Rubric

Adapted from the Duke University BIOTAP (Biology Thesis Assessment Protocol)

	Yes	Somewhat	No
Higher-order writing issues			
Is the writing appropriate for the target audience (undergraduate research conference where readers/ listeners need appropriate framing in the title and introduction)?			
Does the writer address an interesting and significant interpretive problem?			
Does the writer make a compelling argument in response to the problem?			
Does the writer position himself or herself within an appropriate critical conversation?			
Does the paper support its argument effectively with appropriate textual detail or other kinds of evidence?			
Does the writer make a compelling case for the paper's significance (in answer to the "so what?" argument)?			
Does the writer effectively address opposing or alternative views where appropriate?			
Mid- and lower-order writing issues			
Is the paper clearly organized?			
Is the paper free of writing errors?			
Are citations presented consistently and professionally throughout the paper and in the works-cited list?			
Does the paper follow MLA manuscript design features?			
Quality of thinking and interpretation			
Does the writer show sophisticated interaction with larger academic discussions and debates?			
Where appropriate, depending on the subfield, does the writer make effective use of theory or theoretical concepts and methods?			
Does the writer's argument reveal original and insightful thinking that engages the reader in thoughtful inquiry and discovery?			
Does the writer produce new knowledge at an apprentice level for an audience of advanced undergraduate literature majors?			

INSTRUCTIONS TO RATERS

1. For any given paper, answer these questions "yes," "somewhat," or "no."

2. You can use plus or minus signs for nuance if you wish. Count the higher-order writing issues and the thinking or interpretation questions more strongly than the mid- and lower-order writing issues.

3. Place each writer in one of the following categories:

   Distinguished: Almost all questions yield a confident "yes." This category should be reserved for the top 5% or perhaps 10% —papers that as writing samples would make a strong case for the writer's acceptance into graduate school in literary studies or a related field.

   Good: Most questions yield a "yes," but there may be a few "somewhat" responses. These are very successful papers but may lack the sharp quality of insight, sophistication, or execution of a distinguished paper.

   Satisfactory: Questions yield mainly "somewhat" responses that reveal a competent student who has attained considerable insider knowledge of literary criticism and scholarship but whose paper is a mixed or unsustained performance.

   Weak: Questions yield borderline "somewhat" responses with some "no" responses.

   Unsatisfactory: Questions yield numerous "no" responses.

Appendix D

Senior Survey—English Majors

How satisfied are you with

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
a. the quality of teaching in your major?	❍	❍	❍	❍
b. the accessibility of faculty in your major?	❍	❍	❍	❍
c. academic advising in your major?	❍	❍	❍	❍
d. availability of courses in your major?	❍	❍	❍	❍
e. your overall experience in your major?	❍	❍	❍	❍

How well did the major prepare you to

	Very well	Adequately	Not enough	Not at all
f. analyze a range of literary texts?	❍	❍	❍	❍
g. understand various historical periods?	❍	❍	❍	❍
h. recognize various theoretical approaches?	❍	❍	❍	❍
i. write well?	❍	❍	❍	❍
j. undertake research?	❍	❍	❍	❍

Postcollege plans

	Yes, related to major	Yes, not related to major	No, but looking	No, and not looking
k. Do you have a job after graduation?	❍	❍	❍	❍

	In this state	Within 250 miles (regional)	Elsewhere in the US	Outside the US
l. If you answered "yes" to *k*, above, where is the job located?	❍	❍	❍	❍

	Yes, this fall	Yes, within two years	Probably, but not sure when	No plans for graduate school
m. Do you plan to attend graduate school?	❍	❍	❍	❍

	MA	MAT	MFA	PhD
n. If you are attending a graduate program *in English*, please identify it.	❍	❍	❍	❍

	LLB or JD (law)	MBA	MSW	Other
o. If you are attending a graduate program *outside* English, please identify it.	❍	❍	❍	❍

Please add any additional comments about the English major that you would like to share with us.

Appendix E

Assessment and Planning Forms

Form 1

Outcome	*Example:* Student can perform textual analysis and synthesize secondary sources and original thought into a college-level essay.
Assessment tool	*Example assignment:* Researched literary-analysis essay. Assigned and collected at end of term. Pertinent rubric categories: • adherence to MLA style • understanding of conventions and vocabulary of literary analysis • sophistication of scholarship • thesis and idea development • competency in written Standard English
Evaluation procedure	*Explain the methodology here. Do faculty members evaluate their own student work? Is a sample of each faculty member's student work evaluated by colleagues?*
Definition of mastery	*Example:* "Mastery of outcome" for this competency is defined as scoring in the top half of the rubric in at least four of the rubric categories.
Number of students evaluated	*Provide number*
What percentage or fraction of students showed mastery of outcome?	*Present results*
Plans to increase the success rate in future terms	*Example:* Results show that 88% of students achieved master of this outcome, which is above the 80% mark that defines success for the institution. Further analysis reveals, though, that of the 127 essays analyzed by faculty, only 55% earned top-half marks in the "sophistication of scholarship" category. As a result of this finding, the department is making the following adjustments: 1) the curriculum of lower-level English courses will now include more independent scholarship; 2) the curriculum of upper-level literature courses will include more direct teaching of scholarly expectations.
Resources needed from the college for improvement	*Example:* Meeting space and hospitality funds for a departmental curricular development workshop.

Form 2

This form is reproduced, with permission, from the University of Maryland's Office of Undergraduate Studies.

Please limit each response to approximately 100 words.

Attach supporting documents as appendices. Where appropriate, please include examples of assessment tools (prompts used to generate student work that is assessed, such as pre- or posttest questions, question sets, assignment instructions) and rubrics or statements of criteria used to assess student work.

Actions Taken as a Result of Past Assessments

1. What have you done in the past year to follow up on past assessments or on feedback from reviews of your assessments? What decisions were reached, and what actions were taken?

Four-Year Assessment Plan

2. Please briefly summarize your four-year assessment plan (to provide context for your results).

Results, Conclusions, and Implementations from Last Academic Year

3. Please list the outcomes you discuss in this report.

[Repeat items 4–7 for each additional outcome assessed.]

4. How did you measure student learning for each of these outcomes?
5. What were the results of each of your assessments? What did you find?
6. How do you interpret these results? What conclusions did you draw?
7. What was the consensus of your program's discussion of these results? What action(s) are you going to take as a result of your discussion and analysis?

Plans for This Academic Year

8. For which outcomes will you be collecting information over this academic year?
9. How will you measure student learning for these outcomes?

Appendix F

The following document is from a 2008 ADE Summer Seminar presentation by John Bean, Seattle University, describing his department's assessment plan. He has graciously permitted us to edit his work and to add materials from a subsequent report in 2011. These materials provide a strong example of a department forging its own way within the terms of assessment for learning. We offer it as a specific example of the concepts discussed in this report and appreciate being able to draw on earlier work done by ADE members on assessment.

Minimal Requirements for a Departmental Assessment Plan

The Prerequisites

1. Develop learning outcomes for the major.
2. Agree to devote one meeting per year (two hours) to an evidence-based discussion of the strengths and weaknesses in the work of students in the major.
3. Appoint an assessment coordinator to run the meeting and write a report.
4. Agree to experiment with changes in teaching methods, emphases, assignment design, or curriculum to address weaknesses identified in 2, above.

The Basic Plan

1. Department selects a learning outcome to be assessed.
2. Teachers identify one or more course-embedded assignment(s) that focus on this learning outcome.
3. Teachers grade the assignments, noting characteristic patterns of strengths or weaknesses based on a common rubric.
4. At the department's annual assessment meeting, teachers report on the patterns they have observed.
5. Teachers identify characteristic problem areas in student performance and brainstorm possible changes that might be made in curriculum, assignment design, emphases, or teaching methods to address these problems.
6. Assessment coordinator writes a one-page report for departmental records.
7. Next year, teachers try implementing some of the suggested changes.

Learning Outcomes: English Major

1. Demonstrate a broad understanding of British and American literary history.
2. Engage questions of justice, value, spirituality, and meaning raised by literary texts.
3. Read and interpret a variety of texts (written, oral, visual, and cultural) from different critical perspectives (formal, intertextual, and contextual) and appreciate how differences in theoretical framework can produce multiple readings of a text.
4. Articulate an understanding of minority experience, cultural diversity, and multiculturalism, including issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity, through the study of US ethnic-minority literature or non-Western texts.
5. Write and speak effectively for different audiences and purposes.
   a. Early in the major: Produce effective close readings that engage basic formal and aesthetic features of texts.
   b. Late in the major: Conduct scholarly inquiry and produce literary research papers in the manner of a literary critic and in the style recommended by the MLA.

Generic Rubric for 400-Level Capstone Papers

Conceptual Frame—Criteria:

- Develops an interesting and significant interpretive problem.
- Has a strong thesis in response to the problem.
- Makes own argument with awareness of alternative positions and theories.
- Uses scholarship and theory appropriately to frame problem.
- Understands what is at stake in the argument (addresses the "so what?" question).
- Understands function of title and introduction in framing an argument for readers.

Very Strong	Moderately Strong	Acceptable	Not Acceptable
Meets almost all the criteria at a high level.	Meets most of the criteria at a moderately high level. May be strong in some criteria but weak in others (e.g., weak title, undeveloped introduction).	Paper presents problem and has thesis, but the context is thin with little sense of what is at stake; thesis may lack surprise or tension; paper may argue the obvious.	Paper lacks thesis in response to a problem.

Quality of Overall Argument—Criteria:

- Supports argument, effectively using textual detail or other kinds of research sources where appropriate.
- Uses sources with sophistication and purpose.
- Understands and uses theory in ways appropriate to the subject.
- Effectively addresses alternative views where appropriate.

Very Strong	Moderately Strong	Acceptable	Not Acceptable
Meets almost all the criteria at a high level.	Meets most of the criteria at a moderately high level; creates a sustained argument throughout but may have some weaknesses in use of evidence or gaps in overall logic or some inattention to alternative views or counterevidence.	Creates a sustained argument but with significant weaknesses such as oversimplification of ideas, thinness of sources, unsophisticated use of sources (overquoting, needless summary), neglect of alternative views and counterevidence.	Does not sustain an argument; information not connected to points; sections without apparent purpose.

Organizational Clarity—Criteria:

- Guides reader with appropriate mapping statements and transitions.
- Places points early in paragraphs; highlights meanings up front.
- Writes unified and coherent paragraphs.
- Understands and follows the principle of old before new.

Very Strong	Moderately Strong	Acceptable	Not Acceptable
Meets almost all the criteria at a high level.	Meets most of the criteria at a moderately high level; usually keeps reader on track; may have a few places where structure is confusing.	Reader has to struggle to follow the structure; organizational problems frequently divert reader from following ideas.	Serious organizational problems throughout.

Rubric continues with other sections: "Stylistic Clarity," "Grammar/Mechanics," "MLA Conventions."

Assessment of capstone papers continued for several years. Student performances were tracked on an annual basis. In that time, the rubric was altered to include five categories: distinguished, good, satisfactory, weak, unsatisfactory.

Excerpts from Assessment Report, 2011

Analysis of program evaluations for students who received distinguished, weak, or unsatisfactory ratings revealed the following patterns. As expected, the mean GPA in the major for students in the highest category was considerably greater than the mean GPA of students in the lower categories. Of the students scoring in the two lower categories:

- 43% had not completed the prerequisite 300-level "text in context" course before taking the 400-level course.
- 40% had major GPAs below 3.0.
- 28% had no program evaluation "signals" that would predict poor performance (they had already taken the 300-level prerequisite course with a grade of B- or higher, and they had GPAs above 3.0).

Percentages do not add up to 100% because some students appeared in two categories—e.g., had not taken the prerequisite course and also had major GPAs below 3.0.

Discussion of Results

In the previous year's assessment report, the department posed three hypotheses about "weak" or "unsatisfactory" writers: (1) These students perhaps have always been weak writers or literary thinkers and could have been identified earlier in their career and given extra help or urged to change majors. (2) These students might have had senioritis or other personal or work difficulties and simply failed to perform up to their previously demonstrated levels of skill. (3) These students might have performed satisfactorily in our 300-level "context and theory" course, where research writing is taught with heavy coaching. Perhaps these students can still do good work but need more teacher intervention and coaching even at the 400 level.

The results from these program evaluations didn't provide definitive answers to any of these questions but advanced the department's thinking. One unexpected discovery was that a large percentage (43%) of the weak or unsatisfactory performers had not taken the prerequisite 300-level context and theory course. This problem can perhaps be resolved by more forceful advising. Another group of students might be helped by earlier detection of writing or literary reading problems (the group of low-end performers who had major GPAs below 3.0—40%). These students might have benefited from more tutoring and course support earlier in the major. One possibility is that teachers of the 200-level reading courses might use a rubric similar to the one used in Freshman Seminars to identify weak writers. Such rubrics may prove more sensitive and reliable than course grades to detect problem students.

The most illuminating discussions focused on the 28% of students who appeared to be doing well in the major yet received a "weak" or "unsatisfactory" mark on the capstone paper. The discussion showed the extent to which English faculty members know their students and strive for care of the whole person. Teachers remembered the named students well and recalled the "life happens" explanations for many of the low scores: clinical depression, family crises, pressure from jobs, and, of course, occasional senioritis characterized by procrastination and turning in less-than-best work.

"Closing the Loop" Actions

There is not yet enough data to determine whether this is a normal distribution curve or a curve that can be moved toward more "aspirational" papers and fewer weak or unsatisfactory papers. The department agreed on the following actions:

- Continue tracking student performance on the capstone papers.
- Increase the rigor or force of advising to make sure that students take the 300-level context and theory course before enrolling in a 400-level capstone.
- Consider developing a simple end-of-course reporting system for 200-level courses based on a rubric similar to that used in Freshman Seminars.

Selected Bibliography: Discourse Approaches to Critical Thinking and Assessment

Bean, John C., David Carrithers, and Theresa Earenfight. "How University Outcomes Assessment Has Revitalized Writing-across-the-Curriculum at Seattle University." *WAC Journal* 16 (2005): 5–21. Print.

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Walvoord, Barbara E., and Virginia Johnson Anderson. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment.* San Francisco: Jossey, 1998. Print.