Memorandum
May 21, 2009

To: English Department Faculty

Fm: Jerry Burns, Dept. Coordinator

Subj: Report on Program Assessment, following initial implementation measures

This is an informal report on our efforts at English Program Assessment, following the initial implementation of newly systematic measures for conducting assessment, including the publication of a comprehensive list of departmental Learning Goals, launching of two new courses, the Sophomore and Senior Assessment Seminars, introduction of the TaskStream Electronic Portfolio requirement (for students below the Senior level), conduct of the Senior Competency exam in terms of the Learning Goals, and a meeting of departmental faculty to consider assessment data from these different sources.

Principal Findings
These findings principally derive from a review of aggregate data (and also personal impressions) from the Senior Competency Exams, supplemented as appropriate by information from other sources (e.g., TaskStream e-folios). See attached statistical results for full details.

Strengths
- A number of students turned in exceptionally strong performances in this year’s Comp Exam, averaging above a 3 on all Learning Goals in the new scoring protocol, in which 3 represents the level of competency expected of graduating students. Six of the thirteen candidates were awarded an informal mark of “Honors” (and in one case “High Honors”) on the Exam. The Department is investigating the possibility of registering these distinctions, over and above the usual “Pass” and “Fail” evaluations, on the academic transcript.
- Notably high scores, averaging close to 3 for all students taking the Exam, were achieved in the Literature and Life standard, comprising three Learning Goals which ask students to demonstrate integration of their academic training within the Department with their career goals, citizenship aspirations, and personal lives.
- In general, scores on Standard 3, Interpretation, including especially the higher-order goal of interpreting “complexities of textual meaning,” were solid—a finding reinforced by data from the sophomore and junior electronic portfolios.
- The quality of writing demonstrated in the craft and critical essays turned in as part of the Comp Exam, often a sore point in the informal assessments of the past, received ratings in the mid-range, and at least did not seem to stand out as a problem this year. The consensus among the faculty appears to be that the new practice of writing and revising the essays within the structure of the Senior Assessment Seminar, has allowed for general improvement.
Weaknesses

- The number of strong performances found its converse in the number of weak ones. Two students failed the Exam outright (and did not pass even with the opportunity for a re-take), and four passed only with Conditions that needed to be removed in a re-administration of portions of the Exam. Only one received a grade of “Pass” the first time, and overall the scores of these seven (even with the adjustments made after the re-takes) averaged a full point or more lower in the scoring protocol than the six who received marks of “Honors.” All these scores fell significantly below the 3 expected of English majors at graduation. In other words, the split between notably strong and notably weak students within the major, remarked upon informally in past Comp Exams, shows up markedly in this first set of more systematically collected assessment data.

- Marks for Goal 1.C., “Demonstrate acquaintance with principal critical approaches,” fell below expectations (in fact, little above 2, level of competence expected at mid-point in the career) wherever in the Exam—the essay, the defense of essay, or the general demonstration of the Literary Knowledge standard—the goal was evaluated. This finding was clearly reinforced by data from the sophomore/junior portfolios, where the average score for this Goal was little above 1, the level expected of a student entering the major.

- Marks for the Craft Essay, required of students pursuing the Creative Writing track within the English Major, fell below the level of the Critical Essay typically required of students pursuing the Literary Studies track. The disparity especially stood out with respect to three students who were given permission to turn what had begun as Craft essays into Critical ones (after they were adjudged to be following especially promising critical insights). These three essays all scored over 3, while only one of the remaining six did so.

- While the marks for Standard 2, Language in Literature, do not appear notably low for the Comp Exam, and while several faculty expressed the opinion that the component of the oral portion of the Exam designed to test for the goals within this standard, the close reading of a selected short poem, had been focused in such a way as to allow for improved performances, there nevertheless existed some uneasiness about the competence of our students in the technical linguistic analysis of literary texts. This uneasiness was abetted by unimpressive scores in this area within the soph/junior e-folios.

Proposed Actions

- The learning needs of the weaker students in the English Department appeared to present such a large challenge that it became more the subject of general discussion than specific remedial measures. It was acknowledged, however, that the Assessment Program itself, spelling out Program Learning Goals and holding students accountable for meeting them, both through evidence of their work compiled in the Portfolio and through performance in the Senior Comp Exam, and also encouraging students to take, in context of the Assessment Seminars, thorough and honest stock of their own progress, might well have a beneficial effect on the learning of all students, the weaker ones perhaps in particular. In
addition, faculty members encouraged each other, in considering changes to individual course design and instructional practice (an “action” step, discussed below), to find ways of cultivating and monitoring the development of weaker students, as opposed to letting them “hide” behind the contributions to class discussion and group projects, etc., of their more able classmates.

- The weakness in acquaintance with literary critical theories and approaches is to be addressed primarily through new emphases in courses within the English core. Introduction to Literary Studies will be redesigned to include a more explicit treatment of schools of criticism than heretofore; this will include a requirement for students to make use of at least one such approach in the final critical essay required for the course. Intro to British Literature and Intro to American Literature will also make explicit a commitment to exploration of relevant critical approaches. The core Shakespeare offerings was not formally discussed in this context, but it is hoped that the individual resolutions (discussed below) will bring critical perspectives more to the foreground in these courses, as well.

- Problems noted in student understanding and execution of the Craft Essay requirement will be taken in hand by the Creative Writing faculty. Larger issues involving the relationship between the Creative Writing and Literary Studies tracks, which surfaced in the discussion of Comp Exam results but are not directly related to them, will be addressed by the Department in the near-term future.

- Suspected softnesses in the skills of linguistic-literary analysis will be addressed through a new requirement made of all students: a “log” of word meanings, word sounds, and rhetorical figures encountered in texts studied within individual courses in the major. This log, to be paired with another calling for a recording of literary works read, both in and outside of courses (and geared to demonstration of the Literature and Life standard), will be made available to students in electronic form and will become a part of the e-Portfolio. Individual instructors are also encouraged to incorporate the “literary language” log into their courses, as “take-home” portions of the final exam, or in lieu of other course requirements.

- In addition to these programmatic initiatives, individual faculty members will, as noted above, develop written statements of their intentions to address the learning needs identified in this assessment, through appropriate changes in course design and instructional practice. These statements will be made available to all members of the department, in order to share useful ideas and promote a sense of common endeavor.

- Not because it showed up as an area of weakness but because it was added as a criterion for evaluating performance in the Comp Exam (and now seems to the faculty a skill worthy of conscious cultivation and monitoring), a new goal in “speaking and listening/otherwise processing information” will be included in the Program Learning Goals, under the re-named Standard Communication.

- A further resolution was taken to place information relating the Franklin Pierce English Department Assessment Program on the department’s web page, for the information of prospective students/parents and of professional colleagues at other institutions.