

Program Review – Department of English

Report prepared by Joshua Richards, Assistant Professor of English, Williams Baptist College following visit to Blue Mountain College on November 17, 2017.

I. Summary

Blue Mountain College's focus on self-assessment and improvement manifests at all levels from the administration to the departments. The English department is emerging from a state of stagnation and is moving in the right direction. More steps will need to be taken, obviously, but this is a department of which to be proud. The English program at Blue Mountain College has a laudable culture among its faculty and students (*q.v.* II). The faculty members are in-tune with each other and perform their pedagogical duties with an admirable professionalism and sensitivity. Some small suggestions for redivision of courses and proposed a few ideas for assessments have been made (*q.v.* III). As I have been charged with offering critiques, there are three significant issues to address as well as several minor ones. The first is that there is a disconnect between the faculty and administration, for whatever reason, on the teaching of objectionable material in upper-level courses (*q.v.* IV.A.2). The second is that the workload for faculty in the English department is untenably high (*q.v.* IV.A.3). The third is that the literature capstone course needs, as noted in the report, to be almost completely reconfigured (*q.v.* IV.B.1). To conclude the report, the English faculty's own recommendations are reviewed (*q.v.* V); these are, on the whole, very sensible, and most may be enacted immediately. Much of this material was communicated to the faculty or Dr. Enzor, but I thought it best to place it in writing.

II. Commendations

The English department at Blue Mountain College is in a good state, and I have, personally, no doubt will continue to move from strength to strength. Many large-scale issues that could plague a faculty are entirely absent. There is no evidence of in-fighting, disruptive behavior, or wildly inconsistent grading/workload in courses. The faculty members were all very much in tune with each other and were scrupulously conscious of each other's classrooms—to a degree that was frankly surprising. This is likely the cause of the high degree of uniformity between the classes. In a small college, such uniformity is actually quite desirable as it enables the creation of a consistent culture in the department. There is clear evidence that just such a culture has infused the program and created a very positive environment for student writers. In general, the students felt the faculty to be highly accessible, and all reported a high amount of out-of-class interaction. This is absolutely key at a small college, a strength to be tended. Additionally, the department has some very forward-thinking and proactive approaches to student retention and composition remediation. The department is clearly devoted to all aspects of their pedagogical practice.

III. Suggestions

I have several small items to discuss that arose naturally from the visit. These do not represent deficiencies in the department but rather possibilities for additional improvements.

- A. The first is that, in likely the capstone writing class, the faculty should consider asking students to prepare the application materials for literary agents (or for manuscript preparation and cover letters for poetry students). Since querying agents is the most common avenue for publication, these difficult-to-prepare documents might be included

in perhaps the final project. It would be very beneficial to walk students through the process.

- B. The second concerns course divisions. I recommend splitting American Literature I and II at 1900 instead of 1865. This is something I have done in my own classes, and it resulted in much stronger courses with a better division of material. The general division at 1865 is quite antiquated, especially when students need to be familiar with literature up to the contemporary age. Additionally, I not only second the splitting of World Literature into multiple courses, but I recommend three courses instead of two: a literature of classical antiquity, a literature of the middle ages and renaissance, and a literature of the modern world. Having only two courses, as we do at Williams, tends to result in World Literature I being two eight-week courses; we return from our midterm break to find that temples have been replaced with cathedrals and castles.
- C. The third is that the department, given the expressed (and eternal) limits of library resources, could utilize the course reserve feature, particularly for courses with research papers.
- D. The fourth is that the department has, seemingly, bowed to pressure from its students and assigns less reading than might be warranted. Having heard the general amounts per course, I believe the department could comfortably increase the amount of reading by at least twenty-five percent and maybe as high as fifty with no significant strain on its students. Personally, I assign on average (depending significantly on complexity and situation) thirty-to-sixty pages of prose per calendar day to upper-level students in reading

courses, and we have actually gained majors since my arrival. I wouldn't necessarily recommend *that* much reading, but I state it as an example.

IV. Critiques

While the department is in excellent shape and moving in a positive direction, my mandate does include critiques. The first group of which are directed toward the more administrative side; those specific to the department will follow.

- A. 1. Of these, the first is that the course descriptions in the department are very inconsistent in tone, wording, and content. Upon hearing more the department's story, the reason why is perfectly clear—those under the old dispensation, so to speak, read one way, and those under the new another. This ought to be regularized, at some point.
- A. 2. The second is that there is a disconnect between the administration and the faculty regarding the exclusion of objectionable material (from a religious-college perspective) in upper-level English courses. The message from the administration was of unwavering support for the faculty to teach the discipline as it is; this was, quite evidently, not felt by the department, which seemed gun-shy about the matter. Even the students sensed that the faculty, outside of the contemporary literature course, shied away from or censored offerings. Some further meetings or affirmation on this matter are likely necessary.
- A. 3. The third is that the work and teaching load for the faculty is alarmingly, and possibly unsustainably, high at the present. A 5/5 is a very high teaching load, more in-line with a community college than who I was told Blue Mountain desires to be, and is certainly not

found in a number of peer institutions; Williams has been 4/4 since at least the mid-1990s. This heavy teaching load is further exacerbated by the persistent overloads. Furthermore, the fact that the department teaches a lot of writing courses, at all levels, is a source of additional strain. Upper-level writing courses are very labor- and time-intensive. This all has, from an administrative perspective, two serious consequences. The first is that there can be a negative impact on faculty retention. What profits a school to build a wonderful department with a great culture and consistently lose them to overwork? The second is that high workloads cause stagnation. With little time for their own development and research, faculty tend to fall into a rut; teaching becomes more rote as it is all anyone can do simply to keep up—the Red Queen’s race in *Through the Looking Glass*. This seems inconsistent with the culture of self-improvement that Blue Mountain College has been establishing. I apologize if this foments discontent or opens the metaphorical can of worms, but I would not be fulfilling my commission without mentioning it.

On the departmental side, there are two issues related to the capstone course along with two additional issues.

- B. 1. The Capstone, as has been discussed in the program review and meetings, does need to be split into a separate course on Literary Theory and then the advanced research writing component. This has long been recognized by the department and does not need belaboring. The more insidious problem has to do with the position of the capstone in the rotation—in short, if the class is taken in the final semester, most of the students in the course have already long since applied and been accepted (or not) for graduate study by the time the final writing project is even in earnest begun. This limits the usefulness of

and motivation for this final item, if it cannot be used to aid the next phase of study for the most advanced students.

- B. 2. The next issue arose from speaking with the students—thus, it only merits investigation and may reflect perception and not reality. Essentially, the students complained that certain authors and works—they concurred on Faulkner and “Barn-Burning”—were taught in multiple classes. It may warrant reviewing the upper-level and general-education syllabi to see if this is born out in reality.

- B. 3. The final issue for the faculty is a lack of entry testing in the data-collection. English is very much a value-added discipline, and the departmental evaluation, already quite robust, would be all the better if data were collected on majors and minors either at the beginning of the program and/or at the beginning of specific courses.

V. Individual comments on Departmental Recommendations

Below, I offer individual comments, if they are not addressed elsewhere in the report. I have not quoted the individual item as it appears in the program review.

- 1. On the matter of increasing the volume of hours in the major, I concur wholeheartedly. I would only suggest that this be done with a very clear idea on the final product. The temptation is, of course, to add reams of upper-level electives, but I think this should be resisted. A small school cannot compete with the volume and depth of options that a large state-school offers; however, a small school *can* make certain that its students have a thorough and consistent background in every period of literature. I would consider offering more and detailed surveys

rather than a chaotic mass of electives—at the least, being programmatic and intentional about the offerings.

2. On the matter of splitting the World Literature, I have already spoken under suggestions (III.B).

3. The capstone class and Literary Theory has been addressed under Critiques (IV.B.1).

4. My opinions regarding this are fleshed out under item 1 of this list(V.1).

5. On the matter of allowing students to avoid EN 200, I have my reservations, which I shared with Dr. Galliher during my visit. My concern would be that EN 200, as it was explained to me, is where much of the specific instruction on research and close-reading occurs. In true literature-surveys even in those that include papers (a matter on which the department is divided), there is rarely real time set aside for instruction on research and writing (being outwith the primary objective). Thus, I question this recommendation in its current form, although I think some version of it may be actionable.

6. While I think the inconsistent numbering of literary surveys does want addressing, I would have reservations about making them all 200 level. The reason is transfer credit from community colleges (with which BMC appears to have a fraught relationship); at Williams, all of our surveys are 300-level, which blessedly allows us to not accept transfers of literary surveys for English majors *etc.* If they were all 200-level, the college would likely be forced to accept transfer/transient credit for many important upper-levels.

7. On the matter of hiring a new faculty member, I can have no recommendation—I was not privy to the kind of information that would allow me to do so legitimately. As to whether the department should, if given the chance, use a new tenure-track line on a comp/rhet specialist, I am not in total agreement. In a small college, emphasis must be placed first on mission-fit and then on quality. I think the department would be equally justified in hiring a post-18th century

British Literature specialist as that is a gap in expertise as large as the lack of writing specialist. Now, I would certainly recommend that a faculty who has a sub-interest in creative-writing take precedence over one who did not, but I would advise to keep options open in the advertisement.

8. I am in agreement with not *requiring* the writing-emphasis students to take both capstone courses. However, I would encourage the faculty to pressure writing students who are interested in pursuing graduate work (whether MFA or whatever) to take both Literary Theory and the Literature Capstone as those skills will be *deeply* needed at the next level.

9. The suggestions for renaming courses are sensible and should be enacted immediately.