Office of Undergraduate Studies

August 15, 2011

(The following is a digest of the report of the spring 11 World Humanities Assessment team prepared on behalf of the team by Justin Turner, with contributions from Richard Braverman and Grazyna Drabik. Copies of all three reports are attached.)

Assessment Team:
WHUM Instructors:
Richard Braverman
Grazyna Drabik
Justin Turner

Coordination/Oversight
Joshua Wilner, Senior Faculty Advisor for Undergraduate Education
Ana Vasović, Coordinator for General Education

Date of assessment: June 20 – June 23, 2011
Material used: 39 final papers from 13 course sections; papers were scored using a combined writing skills (categories 1-4)/critical thinking (categories 5-6) rubric.

Writing Skills (see items 1-4 of attached assessment rubric)

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Mechanics and Style: While Turner reports that “[S]tudents were writing with a technical sophistication consistent with the expected standard for students at the World Humanities 101/102 level,” Braverman’s assessment was more qualified: “A number of students write nearly error free prose..The majority, however, write too many awkward sentences.” The use of literary terms and vocabulary tends to be rudimentary.

Thesis: “Students grasp the concept of a thesis sentence and where best to locate it.” However, theses tend to be “too vague or obvious to be effectively developed.”

Evidence and Development: “[S]tudents were able to locate evidence in the text and present the evidence in their essays.” However, it was often unclear how the evidence contributed to the argument (to the extent that one was clearly delineated), and in general “students demonstrated difficulty with the synthesis of ideas,” and, correlatively, the synthesis of evidence. Transitions were weak, and analysis and interpretation typically gave way to exposition and plot summary.
**Structure and Organization:** Most student demonstrate a basic understanding of how to structure a literary essay. However, there is “a general weakness of organization” resulting from “a failure [to arrange] individual pieces of evidence into… coherent paragraphs that build meaning from one to the next.”

**CRITICAL THINKING** (see items 5 and 6 of attached assessment rubric)

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**Reflections on Context:** The committee found this section of the rubric difficult to work with in its present form. To the extent it was able to draw conclusions, it found that “some [essays] suffer from attempting to cover too many texts in too few pages, [while others] attempt to diagnose complicated texts without the skills necessary to do so sufficiently.” The overly broad scope of so many of the essays suggested to the committee that assignments are often insufficiently specific.

**Conclusions:** Again, the committee found this section of the rubric difficult to work with. While students “know they should write a concluding paragraph,” conclusions tend to be weak and typically offer a perfunctory recapitulation of points already made.  
*It should be noted that this criterion was intended to address students’ ability to logically draw conclusions in the course of their arguments rather than to focus on the rhetorical skill of writing a strong concluding paragraph, as it was evidently construed by the assessment team."

**INFORMATION LITERACY**  
The rubric was not applicable, as WHUM is focused almost exclusively on the reading and interpretation of primary texts.

**Recommendations:**  
The committee urges that FIQWS be made a prerequisite rather than a co-requisite for WHUM.

All students should be required to read the first text prior to the beginning of the semester (an interesting suggestion which raises the question, however, of what the enforcement mechanism would be).

instructors should be “asked to create focused, low stakes assignments based on the texts (in lieu of quizzes) in order to emphasize specific analytic approaches.” The low stakes assignments can be coupled with graded, scaffolded assignments of 3 to 5 pages, and a final essay of 5 to 6 pages. The latter should be assigned well before the mid-semester break.

A literary analysis handout of 4 to 5 pages should be prepared and distributed. “The handout would include: a list of important literary terms; tips for searching for contextual evidence and quotations; guidelines for analysis (including a demonstration of summarizing vs analyzing); a brief explanation of proper parenthetical and passage citation; and other pertinent information. We would include a streamlined version of the Writing/Critical Thinking rubric along with this handout.”
Within the committee, there was disagreement as to the relative emphasis to be placed on reading vs.

writing. Braverman suggested “a recalibration of the reading and writing components of the course,

namely less reading and more writing,” while Drabik, dismayed by the lack of intellectual engagement
displayed by many essays, argued for “more, not less, required reading” and less focus in the

assessment process on basic skills.

The Department of English, which is most immediately responsible for the delivery of the World

Humanities courses, is encouraged to take these (sometimes conflicting) recommendations under

consideration. The CLAS Committee on General Education will engage in a similar and coordinated
discussion.

It appears that the “experimental” critical thinking additions to the writing rubric are not working well in

their present form. It may be preferable to use the entire AAC&U Critical Thinking rubric from which

they are drawn, with assessment teams making allowances as they deem appropriate for those areas

where the writing and critical thinking rubrics overlap. This would have the advantage of restoring the
two “borrowed” critical thinking criteria to a contact that clarifies their meaning and function.

Joshua Wilner
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