14 January 2004
Westmont College

English Department Assessment Plan

Context

This plan is rooted in our departmental self-study of 2000, which was organized around the six learning standards now recognized by the college. The department has now identified four student-learning outcomes we will assess during the current five-year review cycle.

Outcomes

1) We want our majors to be able to use and to recognize metaphor in imaginative writing and critical discourse. More broadly, we want them to show evidence of thinking analogically. (This addresses the standard of critical-interdisciplinary thinking.)

2) We want our majors to show awareness of multiple possible points of view in a literary work and in their own writing. We want them to note limits of their own cultural and historical points of view and to demonstrate empathy for other points of view. (This addresses the standards of diversity and active societal and intellectual engagement.)

3) We want our majors to be able to link technique to purpose in texts which they read and write—to be able to get from how to why. (This addresses the standard of written and oral communication.)

4) We want our majors to be able to make and to recognize scriptural allusions in a way that is appropriate to text and context, thus showing some familiarity with biblical story as foundation for a broader literary tradition. By allusions we mean not only verbal echoes but also larger patterns of prototype and genre. (This addresses the standard of Christian orientation.)

Rationale for Outcomes

We have chosen outcomes that reflect all of the college-wide learning standards except research and technology. This standard may inform future outcome goals, but those we have chosen for this cycle reflect what are, for us, more urgent literary priorities. We have tried to choose goals that are measurable (to some extent), yet also symptomatic of significant aspects of student learning.
Methods of Assessment

1) We will compile an annual department-wide portfolio consisting of A, B, and C papers that address the learning outcomes listed above. We will meet each May to discuss these papers and to record our conversation.

2) We will conduct exit interviews each April with small groups of seniors, randomly chosen. Learning outcome #2 will be most specifically addressed.

3) We will make contact by letter with selected alumni at least once during the review cycle to gain their assessment of their own learning outcomes as evidenced and clarified after graduation. We will craft questions to get at some part of each of the learning outcomes listed above.

Use of Results

Conversation about our annual outcomes assessment may naturally lead to changes in the way we teach and structure our classes. Records of our conversation may provide evidence to accrediting bodies that we are trying to educate our students in good faith.

Current Discussion Points

The department remains ambivalent about assessment. As a community passionate about literature and language, we feel somewhat uneasy about working with social science models and terminology. And we still feel some degree of skepticism that the core of what we teach is in fact measurable. We regard the Parable of the Sower as quite possibly a preferable paradigm of outcomes measurement, and are mindful of a certain star in Shakespeare “Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.” While we appreciate the opportunity that assessment can offer to compare notes on a regular basis on strategies, goals and results, we do regret the considerable time taken away from what we regard as the real work of reading, writing, and imaginatively engaging our students.