

## 2012-2013 Annual Program Assessment Report

**College:** Humanities

**Department:** English

**Program:** Honors

**Assessment Liaison:** RosaMaria Chacon

### 1. Overview of Annual Assessment Project:

Per the Honors Option's five-year plan (revised in Fall 2012), the Honors Committee set out to assess a single Honors SLO this AY. In addition, the Committee was charged with helping assess a common undergraduate SLO. Therefore the Committee assessed two SLOs this year, one specific to its Option and one shared.

Specific to its Option, the Honors Committee assessed Honors Program SLO #1: *Students will articulate clear interpretations of cultural texts* (hereinafter referred to as the Honors SLO). The Honors Committee also assessed the Department's common undergraduate SLO #3: *Students will demonstrate knowledge of creative, literary, linguistic, and/or rhetorical theories* (hereinafter, the Common SLO). Both of these assessments were performed on the same sample, i.e., the same corpus of student work. All six (6) members of the Honors Committee for Spring 2013 took part in the assessment.

### 2. Assessment Buy-In (describe how your chair and faculty were involved in assessment related activities):

During the previous year (2011-2012), the English Department's assessment activities and discussions were often conducted with all FT department faculty during monthly department meetings. Unfortunately, the Department found this method to be rather unwieldy and unmanageable. This is particularly true since the English Department has five options and an additional graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition. This has resulted in six different 5-year plans, which can be confusing and unwieldy for all (whole) department discussions.

Therefore, this year (2012-2013), the Department tried something different. At the beginning of each semester, the Department Chair met with each option head and the assessment coordinator (liaison) to discuss assessment plans and tasks. After these meetings, each option head met with their committees and conducted assessment. These six committees included 28 different

faculty members (out of a total of 32 FT faculty). Thus, almost all English Department faculty were directly involved in assessment. Doing our assessment in this manner enabled us to conduct assessment more effectively, in a focused effort.

In addition, the Department did conduct (in October 2012) one all-faculty discussion and so reached consensus regarding the adoption of a new rubric for assessment of Common Undergraduate SLO #3: *Students will demonstrate knowledge of creative, literary, linguistic, and/or rhetorical theories*. This SLO and rubric are shared by several options.

**3. Student Learning Outcome Assessment Project:** Answer items a-f for each SLO assessed this year.

**HONORS SLO**

---

**3a. Which Student Learning Outcome was measured this year?**

Honors SLO #1: *Students will articulate clear interpretations of cultural texts*.

**3b. Does this learning outcome align with one or more of the university's Big 5 Competencies?**

- Critical Thinking
- Written Communication
- Information Literacy

**3c. What direct and/or indirect instrument(s) were used to measure this SLO?**

For the Honors SLO, the Committee crafted its own 5-point rubric, modeled on the Department's common rubric (see below):

- 5—exceptional
- 4—more than satisfactory
- 3—satisfactory
- 2—less than satisfactory
- 1—highly unsatisfactory

The Honors SLO rubric was drafted and revised in Fall 2012, and is attached here FYI.

### **3d. Describe the assessment design methodology:**

The Honors assessment for this AY focused on a single sample and single point in time. The nature of the Honors Program (the core of which is a series of upper-division seminars typically taken by advanced students within a two-year span) does not easily allow for long-term longitudinal assessment of a group of students, or for cross-sectional assessment across groups (e.g. first-year students versus seniors). In other words, the Program is typically a compressed and intensive experience solely for juniors and seniors, a model that does not allow for many revision points or the long-term tracking of a student cohort.

The assessment sample consisted of seven (7) seminar papers drawn from a section of English 492 (Senior Honors Seminar) taught in Fall 2012. These papers, which were capstone essays for 492, varied in length from 12 to 17 pages each. As is often the case with work in Honors, the sample exhibited a wide variety in subject matter and method, despite originating in a seminar with a specific topic. Among the fields explored in the papers were art history, postcoloniality, poetics, and critical race theory.

### **3e. Assessment Results & Analysis of this SLO:**

The assessment of this SLO would seem to indicate a satisfactory but uneven level of achievement, with an average numeric result of 2.95 (rounded to two decimals). However, analysis of the individual results from the six Committee members seemed to show some disparity in judging criteria, or at least in how individual members interpreted the rubric. Scores for specific papers ranged widely: in a few cases the same paper received scores that diverged by as many as three ranks on the rubric (i.e., 5-2 or 4-1). Taking all judges' scores into account, the seven papers in the sample averaged scores from 2.00 to 3.50. Analysis of the results does indicate that certain papers were judged to be weaker by all; however, at least two papers inspired noticeable disagreement, garnering both positive and critical comments. We should note that the individual judges tended to rate the papers the same, or very close to the same, for both SLOs assessed: in fact two judges scored all of the papers exactly the same for both SLOs, while the remaining four made just slight distinctions between the two SLOs (never more than one ranking off, e.g., 3 for the Common SLO but 2 for the Honors SLO). More pronounced were the differences among the judges. However, the sample appears too small to enable confident extrapolation from or interpretation of these differences.

Applying the Honors SLO rubric proved difficult, due to an apparent lack of consensus as to how the rubric should be applied. Despite the degree of detail in the rubric, and the specific evaluative criteria listed there, most members now agree that the rubric was problematic. Analysis of our assessment results revealed a difference in outlook among the judges: whereas some tended to treat the rubric's adapted Likert scale (5 to 1) as cognate to the standard letter-grading scale (A to F), most did not,

thinking that the highest mark on the rubric (5) asked for an extraordinarily high level of achievement, beyond that attained even by most “A” papers. At least half of the Committee agreed that, as teachers, they would have assigned A-level grades to papers that would have been marked 4 at most (not 5) on the rubric. Several members argued in hindsight that the “5” ranking on the rubric appeared utopian, and very unlikely to be achieved in a seminar paper, even one written by a very strong Honors student. They pointed out that that ranking included so many superlatives as to be unrealistic. Those members said, on reflection, that for them the 5-point scale practically functioned as a 4-point scale, thus skewing the numeric results of the assessment downward.

Some Committee members whose numeric scores differed widely discovered that, *qualitatively*, their assessments of the papers did not differ so greatly. This discovery prompted discussion of the gap between their personal responses to the papers and their application of the numeric scale. This does not mean that all members were sanguine about the level of performance shown in the papers, as some disagreement may persist regarding just how much the flawed rubric accounts for our overall results.

### **3f. Use of Assessment Results of this SLO:**

This year’s assessment seems primarily to have revealed misgivings about the assessment process. In general, the Committee contends that standardized assessment of the Honors Program is problematic. Several members are frankly skeptical of the value of quantitative, spreadsheet-driven assessment, and most agree that this year’s assessment does not give a fair and accurate picture of what the Program does.

Given the diversity of topics and methods in the sample, several members of the Committee suggested that it would have helped to see the specific prompt for this assignment as well as the resulting papers, so as to gain a fuller sense of context. The Chair did not think to request the prompt when soliciting the sample, but agrees that having the prompt would have been most helpful; from now on, therefore, the Committee will request prompts. We note that, since one of the attractions of Honors seminars (for both students and faculty) is the fact that they allow advanced work in specialized and interdisciplinary topics, it is not unusual for such seminars to range widely in methodology and focus, and to explore areas not all faculty members are versed in. Our Honors seminars do not simply provide a capstone confirmation of students’ skills; rather, they move into new or relatively under-studied scholarly topics—in other words, they may involve cutting-edge research. This, the Committee agrees, poses a challenge to standardized assessment, and is one reason why we need to see prompts in the future. In short, the Committee needs to see the particular intellectual contexts and challenges posed by the seminar(s) sampled in every assessment.

In light of the challenges posed by the rubric, the Honors Committee agrees that next year’s assessment rubric should be tested before being applied. The Committee envisions launching the assessment process next AY with a collaborative session in the Fall

semester, during which the Committee members will apply that year's rubric, in draft form, to a small set of papers. Those papers could be drawn from either this year's assessment sample and/or the Honors seminars taught in Spring 2013. Said papers would not be used in the official assessment sample for next AY; they would be used only to spark discussion of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative assessment, and if necessary to guide revision of that year's rubric.

It has also been suggested by several Committee members that future Honors rubrics be simplified along the following lines:

- 0 – student has not met the SLO.
- 1 – student is approaching the SLO.
- 2 – student has met the SLO.
- 3 – student has exceeded the SLO.

Such a scale is used by some other programs at CSUN, and could have the advantage of removing both pejorative and superlative comments as found on the current rubric, comments which may skew the assessment results. The Honors Committee recommends to the Department that it consider using such a rubric to simplify future assessments.

While adopting the above procedures next AY may clarify assessment and help avoid skewed results, the Committee maintains that the qualitative and formative assessment performed by individual teachers in their Honors courses may provide more useful information than what a standardized quantitative assessment can reveal.

## **COMMON SLO**

---

### **3a. Which Student Learning Outcome was measured this year?**

Common SLO #3: *Students will demonstrate knowledge of creative, literary, linguistic, and/or rhetorical theories.*

### **3b. Does this learning outcome align with one or more of the university's Big 5 Competencies?**

- Critical Thinking
- Information Literacy

### **3c. What direct and/or indirect instrument(s) were used to measure this SLO?**

For the Common SLO, the Committee used the Department's common rubric, adopted by the Department's Full Time faculty as a whole. This rubric uses a 5-point, Likert-type scale:

- 5—excellent
- 4—more than satisfactory
- 3—satisfactory
- 2—less than satisfactory
- 1—not demonstrated

### **3d. Describe the assessment design methodology:**

Again, the Honors Committee's assessment of this SLO focused on a single sample and single point in time. The Committee was not charged with, and is not able to perform, either longitudinal or cross-sectional assessment of a Department-wide SLO. Again, the sample consisted of seven seminar papers drawn from a section of English 492 (Senior Honors Seminar) in Fall 2012.

### **3e. Assessment Results & Analysis of this SLO:**

The numeric results of the assessment of this SLO seem to indicate a satisfactory level of achievement overall: 3.00. Taking all judges into account, the seven papers in the sample averaged scores from 2.50 to 3.67. See above (under Honors SLO) for analysis of the disparities among individual judges' scores. In general, the challenges the Committee encountered in applying its Honors SLO #1 rubric also apply, if less severely, to its use of the Common SLO #3 rubric; in other words, the way we approached **this** assessment appears to have been influenced by the way we approached the other. Since the Honors SLO rubric was implicitly modeled on the Likert scale of the Common SLO rubric, the observations above about the problems posed by that scale may apply to the Common SLO rubric as well. We note, however, that the Honors Committee's results may be unique to its role vis-à-vis the Honors Program and its expectations of a very high level of performance; more than one Committee member reported being conscious of interpreting the rubrics quite stringently, as perhaps befits the Committee's charge of assessing the work of Honors students.

### **3f. Use of Assessment Results of this SLO:**

The Honors Committee has focused most of its effort thus far on interpreting and using the results of the Honors SLO assessment in particular, as opposed to the Common SLO, as fits our charge. However, the Committee awaits future Department-wide discussion of the Common SLO and of assessment procedures generally, and will certainly contribute to that discussion. The Committee would welcome the opportunity to discuss the design of assessment rubrics with the entire FT faculty. To strengthen student work in the area of theory (the focus of this SLO), several members of the Committee have suggested that the Department expand its teaching of theory to include a required course that stresses the *application* of theory to texts—a mission that may exceed the scope of the required English 436 (Major Critical Theories), which has the burden of covering a very wide swath of history. The practicability of this suggestion is of course something the Department has to discuss as a whole.

### **4. Assessment of Previous Changes: n/a**

### **5. Changes to SLOs? n/a**

### **6. Assessment Plan (evaluate the effectiveness of your 5-year Assessment Plan):**

Assessment work in the English Department is always completely guided and aligned with the 5-year Assessment Plans (all six of them). We begin with the Plans and stay with them. The only changes we ever make are in small supplemental tasks that are not part of the substantive assessment work. Such changes, when they occur, are usually made necessary by the impossibility of fully completing a supplemental task due to organizational parameters, and are accounted for in our Annual Assessment Reports.

The Department has updated or made adjustments in some of the Assessment Plans based on, one, discovery of previous errors in writing the initial 5-year Plans; and two, the overwhelming workload caused by six different, comprehensive 5-year Assessment Plans. In completing a self-study, writing six 5-year Assessment Plans, and conducting assessment all in one year (during AY 2010-2011) in addition to our regular teaching, service, research and administrative duties, the English Department became swamped by work. Returning to the 5-year Plans, on a year-by-year basis, we discovered inadvertent errors and overwhelming assessment workloads. Therefore we made small adjustments that either corrected our previous errors and/or alleviated some of the workload. During AY 2012-2013, adjustments were made to the Honors and Graduate option Assessment Plans. The corrected Plans were sent to Gregory Mena, Marilyn Filbeck, and Bonnie Paller on 16 February 2013.

### **7. Has someone in your program completed, submitted or published a manuscript which uses or describes assessment activities in your program? No.**

**8. Other information, assessment or reflective activities or processes not captured above. n/a**