Appendix IV: Report of Committee on Assessment of Student Learning

Academic Year: 2013-2014
Date of Report Submission: August 9, 2014
Name of Department/Unit/Program: Honors Program
Name of Contact Person: Rose Spalding
Names of Assessment Committee Members: Jennifer Conary (English), Mike Edwards (First Year Program), Nancy Grossman (Honors), Peter Hastings (CDM), Martha Martinez-Firestone (Sociology), Chris Mount (Religious Studies), and Rose Spalding (Honors/Political Science).

Part I: Follow-Up on Last Year’s Assessment Report Recommendations

When the Honors Program completed its last round of Academic Program Review in 2012, we made a programmatic commitment to strengthen the research component of our curriculum. We have now added an introductory writing requirement, HON100 Rhetoric and Critical Inquiry, which includes a required research paper, and we have clarified and strengthened the research expectations in our 300-level courses (HON301, 350 and 351). Although the varied quality of the research papers produced in these courses suggests that we still have some work to do (as we discovered in our 2012-2013 assessment report), we believe that we’re on the right path.

At the Teaching in Honors Workshop held in June 2013, which was attended by about 35 of the faculty members who teach in the program, we focused on questions about how to strengthen student research. Several participants suggested that the program construct a fuller research “spine.” Instead of having research requirements in just HON 100 and the 300-level courses, they proposed that we identify a 200-level course that could also include a research assignment.

The 2013 Assessment Committee discussed this proposal, endorsed it, and tentatively identified our interdisciplinary social science course, HON201 States, Markets and Societies, as an appropriate candidate. Several factors support this choice. All honors students are required to take HON201. In addition, many of the questions addressed in HON201 lend themselves to research assignments. Finally, over half of the sections of HON201 already include a formal research paper, so strengthening the research expectations in this course would not require a major restructuring of the curriculum.

Part II: Report on This Year’s Assessment Project

Abstract
The 2014 Assessment project focused on assessing the research papers produced for HON201, States, Markets and Societies. We collected a random sample of twenty-five research papers (five per class), along with the prompts, from five instructors teaching this course in winter and spring 2014.
Those instructors who did not assign a formal research paper were asked to select the paper in their course that was most like a research paper and that best aligned with the rubric developed by the 2013 Assessment Committee to evaluate the research papers from the 300-level courses.

Assessment Committee members scored these papers and, based on these scores, classified them successful, mixed or unsuccessful. This exercise indicated that 48 percent were successful, 40 percent were mixed, and 12 percent were unsuccessful. Some of the variation seemed to be associated with the scaffolding of the assignment and the quality of the prompt. Based on this assessment, the committee plans to develop and distribute a “best practices” guide for research paper assignments in HON201.

Learning Outcome Assessed

- Demonstrate the skills necessary to do independent research on complex problems, and to present their work to faculty and peers.

Data Collection and Methodology

We collected a random sample of twenty-five research papers (five per class), along with the prompts, from the five instructors teaching HON201 States, Markets and Societies in winter and spring 2014. Those instructors who did not assign a formal research paper were asked to select the paper in their course that was most like a research paper and that best aligned with the rubric developed by the 2013 Assessment Committee to evaluate the research papers from the 300-level courses (see appendix 1).

The Honors Program Assessment Committee for 2013-2014 was composed of seven faculty members from different disciplines and colleges: Jennifer Conary (English), Mike Edwards (First Year Program), Nancy Grossman (Honors), Peter Hastings (CDM), Martha Martinez-Firestone (Sociology), Chris Mount (Religious Studies), and Rose Spalding (Honors/Political Science). Each committee member read and scored 7-8 papers, at least one from each HON201 class, using the rubric that had been developed by the Honors Program assessment committee in 2013 (see appendix 1). All papers were read by at least two faculty members. The faculty members then met¹ to discuss the process, review the scores, and consider possible recommendations. Committee members also discussed the rubric and the prompts used in each of the five sections.

Papers were scored along four dimensions: thesis quality; ability to situate the work within a field of study; ability to support the thesis with evidence and argument; and ability to document the work correctly. Each of the 25 papers selected for review was assessed by two committee members, generating a total of 200 separate scores. (25 papers x 4 questions x 2 readers = 200). Scores for the four items were then summed and averaged to produce an overall average score for each paper.

¹ One member was out of the country and unable to participate in the meeting. He sent in his scores and comments by email before the meeting.
Although the scoring was all done independently, the scores were generally convergent. On 82% of the items, the two readers assigned either an identical score or a score only one number apart (one assigning a 1 and the other a 2, for example). These cases were regarded as sufficiently convergent, and discrepancies were not pursued further.

In 18% of the cases, the scores diverged by more than one number (one assigning a 2 and the other a 4, for example). In seven of these divergent cases, the paired readers were able to resolve their differences in follow up conversation, which produced either an identical score or scores that were only one number apart. In the remaining eleven cases, such agreement did not emerge. Generally this outcome occurred because one committee member was not able to attend the meeting and follow up conversation about discrepant scores was not possible. When scores remained discrepant, a third reader was selected from among the committee members and an additional review was conducted. In all of these cases, the discrepancy was subsequently resolved with input from the third reader.

With 82% of the scores convergent in the first round and the remaining 18% of the scores reconciled in a subsequent round, the committee concluded that there was sufficient agreement in the scoring process to warrant the use of these results in an assessment project.

**Results**

To construct an overall assessment of the twenty-five essays, each reader’s scores were summed across the four items and a total average score was calculated for each paper. The overall paper was then classified as “successful” (average score in the 1.0-2.0 range), “mixed” (average score in the 2.01-2.99 range), or “unsuccessful” (average score in the 3.0-4.0 range). When all the scores were summed and averaged for each paper, 48% of the papers fell into the successful category, 40% scored in the mixed category, and 12% were classified as unsuccessful (see appendix 2).

Examination of the scores along specific dimensions permitted a more refined analysis of results (see appendix 3). As noted above, committee members evaluated the essays along four dimensions—quality of the thesis statement; whether the thesis was adequately situated in a field of scholarship; whether supportive evidence was provided; and technical proficiency in documentation. Breaking down the scores on each dimension, we were again able to classify the outcomes as “successful,” “mixed,” or “unsuccessful” in each arena. Papers were regarded as “successful” on a particular dimension when both readers reported scores of 1 or 2; “mixed” when readers divided between scores of 2 and 3; and “unsuccessful” when both readers reported scores of 3 or 4.

This exercise indicated that only 44% of the papers included a clear thesis statement (question #1) and were classified as successful on this dimension (see appendix 3). The scores point to greater success in situating the topic in a field of study; 56% of the papers were successful in this regard (question #2). In the two remaining areas (questions #3 and #4), a larger portion of the papers received scores of 1 or 2 and were judged to be successful.
On question three, concerning the provision of evidence and argumentation to support the thesis, and question four, concerning correct citation and documentation, 60% (15 out of 25) of the papers were classified as successful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th># Students Assessed</th>
<th># Students with Acceptable or Better Performance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper writing</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
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**Interpretation of Results**

These results demonstrate that the quality of the research papers produced in HON201 is uneven. Although the committee found almost half of the papers to be successful, it determined that a substantial portion (40%) should be classified as mixed. More problematically, one out of every eight (12%) was found to be unsuccessful.

When examining scores on specific dimensions, the results further indicated that one out of every five (20%) of this sample of research papers failed to provide a strong and clear thesis statement (#1). Sixteen percent failed to adequately situate their argument in a field of inquiry by explaining how their interpretation related to those of other scholars or analysts (#2). On a slightly brighter note, only 8% were classified as unsuccessful in terms of evidence and argumentation (#3). Finally, 12% were unsuccessful in terms of documentation (#4). The relatively good news about successful results in documentation was attenuated by the widespread view among committee members that a correct and consistent documentation style was the least important of the four dimensions evaluated in this assessment project.

These results further demonstrate that student performance was often inconsistent across the four dimensions. An essay might provide a strong thesis statement, for example, but weak evidence in support. Alternatively, the essay might contain a good discussion of competing perspectives on a topic but a weak or non-existent personal thesis statement. When scores were averaged across dimensions, a mixed picture often emerged, as even strong papers tended to have some area of weakness and weak papers tended to have some area of strength.

Looking more closely at the patterns found in the distribution of scores, the committee observed that scores appeared to vary with the nature and quality of the prompt and the extent of scaffolding built into the paper assignment. The papers produced for one class, in which students received a detailed prompt (which required a sequential submission of a paper topic, annotated bibliography, draft paper, and final paper and also included a mandatory consultation with a writing center tutor), received the highest and most consistent scores. In contrast, the papers produced in classes where the prompt was vague and little direction was provided tended to receive many more scores in the unsuccessful range (scores of 3-4).

As mentioned above, the Honors Program’s learning outcomes and writing guidelines for HON201 do not require the assignment of a formal research paper.
Although many instructors do include such an assignment, the Honors Program has not provided any guidance about whether such work should be required or what this assignment might entail. As a result, the kinds of research papers assigned for this course are quite varied. Whereas one class included a highly detailed prompt and a step-by-step breakdown of the assignment, complete with mandatory visits to the writing center, others provided no such scaffolding or opportunities for in-process review and revision. Furthermore, some assignments required students to address a topic stipulated by the instructor and draw primarily on the readings assigned for the course, whereas other sections required the students to identify their own topic and locate most of the readings independently. One class required students to follow a report template, embedding information in specific categories (along the lines of this assessment project), rather than developing their own framework of analysis.

This variation in the nature of the assignment seemed to contribute to the different strengths and weaknesses identified in the results. For the course with the strongest prompt and writing process, 85% of the scores (17 out of 20) were in the successful range (1-2); only 15% were classified as mixed, and none fell into the unsuccessful category. For the course using the report template, in contrast, three of the five papers scored in the unsuccessful (3-4) range on the thesis quality question (#1), and two of the five were unsuccessful in terms of locating the work in a field of inquiry (#2). In another class, which had a vague prompt, two of the five papers were classified as unsuccessful on the thesis quality question, as were two of the five papers on the documentation question (#4).

The committee also noted that the papers produced in one section of HON201, in which students were assigned a seminal question and required to dig deeply into course readings to answer it, also generated a strong set of results. In some ways this kind of assignment did less to build the students’ research skills than the more conventional kind of research paper assignment. The central question in this case was dictated by the instructor, not constructed by the students, and students did little work to develop the reading list of sources they would tackle in the paper. At the same time, this kind of assignment, by reducing the range of activities and focusing the analytical task, tended to help students concentrate on building skills in several areas required for good research. These skills include a clear statement of a conceptually rich thesis, careful review and presentation of competing ideas within a field of study, and systematic presentation of evidence through textual citations. Although further discussion of this issue remains outside the purview of this assessment report, it poses interesting questions about the nature of research and the best ways to build research capacity in high-performing undergraduate students. This question may be pursued in a future assessment project.

Given that these essays were produced in Honors courses, where all of the students should be capable of producing strong work, the number of “unsuccessful” papers in the review pool was a matter of concern.

These results were not entirely surprising, however. The program has offered HON201 instructors no clear definition of research expectations or “best practices” for developing these research papers.
In the absence of clear guidelines on program expectations, uneven results should be expected. These findings do, however, suggest that some program-level work needs to be done.

**Recommendations and Plans for Action**

The Honors Program director will share the results of this assessment report with the faculty members teaching HON201. In hope of sparking fruitful discussion about how stronger student research can be best promoted, the Honors Program director will then organize a workshop with these instructors, ideally in the fall quarter. Faculty members teaching these courses will be invited to share information about their research assignments and will be encouraged to identify a set of “best practices” guidelines. General recommendations about research assignments and expectations for Honors students, as discussed by the assessment committee and elaborated in the HON201 workshop, will be distributed to current instructors and to applicants who propose to offer HON201 in the future.

**Timeline:**

- August 2014: Distribution of 2013-2014 assessment committee report
- Fall 2014: Workshop on research assignments and results for HON201 faculty
- December 2014: Distribution of recommendations and best practices guidelines that emerge from the workshop

A future assessment project can replicate this analysis to see if a larger portion of the research paper prompts provide better scaffolding for the assignment and a larger portion of the papers are classified as successful.

**Barriers:**

- the difficulty of persuading faculty members to read yet one more set of reports and attend yet one more teaching workshop;
- the difficulty of arriving at a consensus on definitions and pedagogical strategies, especially given the interdisciplinary nature of the course and the diverse disciplines represented by the faculty teaching it;
- the difficulty of encouraging faculty members to adapt their preferred approach to assignments in favor of practices that are often more labor intensive and cognitively demanding, and that may impinge on their pedagogical style.
Appendix 1

University Honors Program Assessment Committee Rubric for Research Papers

1. Demonstrates the ability to construct a sound thesis statement, well-articulated central argument or controlling idea

1=excellent thesis statement; thesis is clear and contestable (not self-evident); thesis statement is provided at the beginning of the essay; thesis statement is thought-provoking and innovative;

2=good thesis statement; thesis is generally clear and contestable; thesis statement is provided at the beginning of the essay;

3=fair thesis statement; thesis is not entirely clear; thesis seems self-evident or trivial;

4=weak thesis statement; central idea or argument is difficult to identify; or there is no apparent thesis.

2. Demonstrates the ability to situate their argument within a field of study by analyzing the interpretations or findings of other scholars/analysts/artists who work on this topic

1=presents and evaluates the interpretations of two or more authors who have developed interpretations about this topic; explains the ideas of other authors clearly; thoughtfully considers counterarguments or interpretations that differ from their own; differentiates clearly between their own views and those presented by other analysts;

2=presents and evaluates the interpretations of at least one author working on this topic; explains their ideas clearly; generally differentiates between their own views and those presented by the other analyst;

3=notes that there are differing perspectives, claims, or schools of thought about the topic but fails to attach those perspectives to particular authors; essay does not differentiate clearly between the writer’s views and those presented by other analysts;

4=fails to situate an argument or interpretation in a broader field of study.

3. Demonstrates the ability to support their thesis with argument and evidence

1=identifies and carries out strategies for investigating claims, hypotheses, or arguments; provides solid evidence to support their central idea; substantiates the central idea by drawing on varied and well-targeted source materials; demonstrates an ability to differentiate between high quality and poor quality source materials; provides solid evidence in a consistent and logical fashion to support the central idea;

2=does not identify a strategy for investigating the central idea but proceeds in a systematic fashion; provides solid evidence to support their central claim although the quality of the evidence is not consistent;
3= provides some support for the central argument but the evidence is not well-developed; source materials may be sparse or include several items of poor quality (unidentifiable sources, blogs, Wikipedia entries, etc.);

4= provides little evidence to support any particular claim or argument; draws on weak sources and depends on information of dubious quality.

4. Demonstrates ability to follow a citation format correctly and consistently, and to construct complete and accurate entries on a Works Cited page

1=Citations are used appropriately; citations follow a consistent format; the Works Cited page contains few errors;

2=Citations are used appropriately; citations generally follow a major style sheet; the Works Cited page is generally correct;

3=Sources are sometimes missing or incomplete; citation format is clear but not consistent; the Works Cited page is incomplete; sources cited in the text are missing or important information is absent;

4=The essay does not demonstrate basic familiarity with the requirements of research documentation.

Overall, scores of 1 and 2 indicate that the essay successfully meets the requirements of a research paper. Scores of 3 and 4, in contrast, indicate notable weaknesses in the performance.

Appendix 2: Overall Classification of Honors 201 Student Research Papers

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Average Score</td>
<td>12/25 = 48%</td>
<td>10/25 = 40%</td>
<td>3/25 = 12%</td>
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“Successful” = total average score in the 1.0-2.0 range; “mixed” = total average score of 2.01-2.99; “unsuccessful” = total average score in the 3.0-4.0 range.
## Appendix 3: Classification of Honors 201 Student Research Papers by Question

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Situated in a field of study</td>
<td>14/25 = 56%</td>
<td>7/25 = 28%</td>
<td>4/25 = 16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Evidence</td>
<td>15/25 = 60%</td>
<td>8/25 = 32%</td>
<td>2/25 = 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Documentation</td>
<td>15/25 = 60%</td>
<td>7/25 = 28%</td>
<td>3/25 = 12%</td>
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