The English Department’s 2010-2011 assessment exercise was directed toward assessing the ‘value added’ to the English major by our capstone sequence, English 398-399, relative to a key umbrella goal of the English major: “Writes thoughtfully and persuasively about a topic of her own choosing in literary, cultural, and/or medial studies.” All of our seniors write a 45-page thesis in the spring of the senior year, which is graded by the thesis adviser and by a second reader who comes to it cold, without being involved in its conception or production in any way. The department has developed a rubric for assessing the senior thesis in the spring (see attachment); for the past few years, both readers have filled out this rubric for each of the essays that falls to them to read, as well giving each essay a numerical grade.

In the fall of the senior year, we prepare our seniors to embark on the thesis in a team-taught seminar (English 398) whose purpose is to yield a viable topic, match the student with an appropriate adviser, and get the actual writing started by the end of the semester. This course, and the one-on-one mentoring each student subsequently receives from her thesis adviser in English 399, are geared especially toward what our rubric calls “Critical Engagement” (“introduces a clear critical question,” and so forth) and “Methodology” (“cites from secondary sources,” “effectively defines and applies key theoretical terms,” and so forth). Together, these two categories of assessment capture a dimension of what our majors learn to do that is major-specific, comes into play at a relatively advanced level (in our 300- more than in our 200-level courses), and is directly called into action by the capstone sequence.

Last year once again we rubricized the senior essays in May. We also built a diagnostic ‘moment’ into English 398 in September that would allow us to compare each student’s
capacities as a reader, writer, and scholar coming into the senior year with what they were at the end of the year, as demonstrated in the thesis.

Each student brought to the first meeting of the seminar a recent essay she was especially proud of—the one that seemed to her to represent her strongest work to date. One of the seminar facilitators met with each student to discuss this essay, with an eye to both her strengths and her deficits as a reader, scholar, and writer, coming into the senior year. The seminar facilitators produced a short paragraph of commentary that spoke to the essay’s strengths and limitations relative to "Critical Engagement" and "Methodology"; they also rubricized each essay, so that each student could be compared with herself when we rubricized the senior theses in May. After the same rubric had been applied in May to the senior theses, Mark Freeman compared the two rubrics for each student, compiled the results for the class as a whole, and shared them with us in a useful set of graphs that is attached to this report.

What we found was that our weakest students and our ‘middling’ students did indeed make their biggest gains, from pre-test to post-test, in Critical Engagement, Methodology, and a third category, “Context(s),” which assesses how successfully the critical question addressed by the thesis has been situated vis-à-vis both the relevant generic tradition and the work of other critics. For the dozen or so students with the highest scores on these three measures in the fall, the senior essay had not raised their scores—indeed, these students’ scores, in the aggregate, showed a decline on these three measures from pre-test to post-test. We attribute this in part to the statistical phenomenon known as “regression toward the mean,” in part to the difference in length between the essays they chose to show us in the fall and the 45-page essay that was assessed at the end of the year, and in part to our having only the one essay to assess in May. (Had we looked at an essay produced by the same student in another 300-level course in the spring, we might conceivably have seen more gains between September and May in these three areas than the thesis itself displayed). Encouragingly, however, the aggregate results for the entire class show a statistically significant gain in these areas—which suggests to us that our 398-399 sequence is doing the pedagogical work we want that course to do for the students
who need it most.

Having applied the same rubric in its entirety for both pre-test and post-test assessments, we also found, not unexpectedly, that all three groups appeared to gain less, over the course of the year, in terms of their command of “Mechanics”: “error-free prose,” “effective paragraph-level organization,” and so forth. We teach to these aspects of good writing in all of our courses, but it did not surprise us to discover what we think these results suggest: a) that the ‘growth spurt,’ supposing there is one over the course of the student’s four years of the college, will already have occurred by the end of the junior year; and b) that a student’s writing may regress, in terms of these “mechanics,” as she struggles to get her arms around a project that is bigger and more ambitious than she’s ever had to cope with before.

Upon examining the data gathered from two years of assessment using the rubrics we developed as a department, we were pleased to see that what we hoped was happening, was indeed happening.

1. Our students gained skills and strengths in the areas we were most concerned about, namely, introducing critical questions anchored in interpretation, and effectively identifying and implementing critical methodologies.
2. Students whom we identified as the weakest coming into the senior year essay made the greatest gains in those areas of development about which we were most concerned.

STUDENT LEARNING GOALS IN ENGLISH 398

English 398 is a course that prepares students across the fall semester to write a self-directed research paper in the spring semester. By the end of the fall semester we want students to be able to:

Present their research strongly
Use their chosen text as an object of study
Engage critically with their primary text
Choose and articulate a critical methodology
Place their text in historical and critical context

SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVES
Across the fall semester of their senior year (English 398) students work to prepare a prospectus and a proposal to the department that explains their research goals.

Across English 398, students produce several readings of their primary text, exploring various possible avenues of enquiry.

Across English 398, students read a range of critical materials that engage their text, or the historical and critical contexts of their text, and write essays developing their own arguments alongside those of more established critics.

By the end English 398, students present their work to the department and are expected to be able to place their research and their argument in a methodological context. They are responsible for articulating the history and consequences of that methodology for their particular research project.

By the end of English 398, students present their work to the department and are expected to be able to articulate its historical significance both to a broader field, a set of critical questions, and to a variety of cultural contexts.

**STRATEGIES USED TO ACHIEVE LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

English 398 puts students through an escalating series of assignments that help them develop the goals we want them to achieve.

Every class meeting involves small-group work in which students workshop one another’s writing and help one another develop their research and methodology. We believe this peer-oriented work helps students take responsibility for their own projects, and helps them develop the confidence and ability to present their work fluently.

Students wrote close readings, critical engagements, creative and critical analyses, and then write several drafts of a proposal. They also produce a 20-entry annotated bibliography.

Students have several private meetings with professors, and are asked to come back and present the results of those conversations to the class as a whole.

**DISCUSSION OF PROJECT**

The department met to discuss the findings. The results of that discussion are presented above.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE**

For the most part the English Department found that the assessment cycle confirmed what we already believed about our senior year project; that it works and that students benefit in the areas we identified as important to us as a department. We are interested in making
what already works work more effectively; the assessment cycle helped us realize that our strongest students, who take on more complicated projects, are left in need of more direct assistance for facilitating their work. The course is designed to help students take big steps toward self-directed research, and perhaps it needs to be more fine tuned for students who have already taken those big steps. The department is still discussing what those changes might look like, but we think they might fall in the mentoring that takes place in the second semester of the senior year.

FOLLOW UP ASSESSMENTS

The department is interested in taking the rubric we developed for 398 back to our sophomore Methodologies course, and finding a way to assess how the sophomore experience leads students effectively, or less effectively, toward the senior year.