

Mellon Curricular Mapping Grant Report  
Department of English  
(Drs. Victoria Aarons, Willis Salomon, and Claudia Stokes)  
June 10, 2014

## **Background**

During the academic year 2013-14, Trinity University's Department of English examined our major curriculum to clarify and extend the role of student research in the English major. To start, we proposed the following tasks for our work: 1) to assess the research component of our gateway course, *Literary Methods*; 2) to explore the possibility of research in our lower-division surveys, now required of all English majors; 3) to compare the extent and kinds of research-focused assignments in our upper-division seminars; and 4) to expand and formalize our already successful "Research Fellowships," in which small groups of students work independently for academic credit under the supervision of a faculty member on topics related to that faculty member's research.

Our work on these four components of the English major took the following form. First, we identified the skills and knowledge bases for each stage of the major (lower-division, upper-division, independent research). Next, we came to an unsurprising consensus about what constituted evidence of proficiency regarding these aims for curricular content and student performance. Finally, we determined how we might go forward through a continuing emphasis on student research to enhance the abilities of our students to perform the knowledge and skills imparted by the major.

## **Student Research in the Four Components of the English Major**

The following offers an account of our work this past year on each of the four components of the English major.

### 1) *Literary Methods*

The department considers *Literary Methods* the "gateway" course to the major. This course prepares new English majors to succeed in upper-division courses by focusing on the following skills: 1) identifying salient formal and rhetorical aspects of complex literary texts and presenting those observations orally and in writing; 2) writing interpretive arguments based on close analyses of complex texts; 3) finding, summarizing, and incorporating secondary material on these texts and on their cultural and historical contexts to support and deepen these interpretive arguments; and 4) acquiring a working knowledge of current literary and cultural theory by which they can expand their individual interpretive "tool kits" and with which they can recognize argumentative strategies in the secondary material they employ in essays.

Skills 3) and 4) involve student research most directly. In our assessment of this course, we have found that, for skill 3), annotated bibliographies followed by a formal proposal articulating a thesis in response to this research effectively focus a student's critical work. These annotated bibliographies have multiple entries on the subject surrounding a given student's essay topic.

Most instructors for this course assign a research session with the Department's library liaison to ensure that students know the proper databases, search techniques, etc. for conducting advanced research. Because this course places a high premium on the *incorporation* of secondary material into an extended line of critical argument, the annotated bibliographies and proposals are evaluated and returned at least a week before the essay is due with suggestions for the essay. We emphasize succinct, comprehensive summary in evaluating these assignments, and we actively teach techniques for reading arguments critically. Regarding skill 4), we have found that, in addition to assigning a summative guide to

contemporary critical theory along with selected, discipline-defining theoretical essays, good pedagogy has included working with “theorized” scholarly essays in class to show students how theory’s tool-kit translates into on-the-ground interpretive argument.

Our assessment of *Literary Methods* leads us to believe that, in order to extend and clarify the role of student research in the English major, we need to continue to emphasize our existing pedagogy in this course and intensify its execution, emphasizing especially an awareness of existing literary critical conversations and their crucial role in making arguments of appropriate depth and sophistication.

## 2) Lower-Division Surveys

The English Department’s lower-division surveys, a sequence of four historically organized introductions to British and American literature, are not the most obvious venues for developing student research. There are two reasons for this. One, these courses are proper surveys, chronological investigations into major figures, genres, texts, and relevant cultural background. They *per force* move fast, and involve primarily lecture. Secondly, the audience for these courses is a large and mixed one. Most students are not English majors, though English majors are required to take them. Therefore, in the Department’s surveys, examinations comprise the majority of student work. Nonetheless, the Department agrees that essays should be assigned in these classes and that research into relevant secondary material should comprise part of the work for those assigned essays. Moreover, the Department agrees that lectures in these classes should “model” research by explicating grounding interpretive insight with historical, cultural, and critical background.

## 3) Upper-Division Seminars, Research-Focused Assignments

Our assessment of the English Department’s upper-division seminars this year has revealed that the majority these classes already emphasize independent student research. Major assignments in these classes generally require students to join a theorized close analysis of a literary text or texts with scholarly research in the form of both critical essays and research into contextual background. Faculty monitor student research projects in office conferences and through written commentary directed at the particular stage of the student’s project. Syllabi for these classes include, along with primary texts, assigned readings in foundational scholarly commentary and historical background. Because these classes tend to enroll fewer than 15 students, they stand as the department’s primary venue for encouraging more advanced student research. We intend to enhance student research in these courses by making them count for four credit-hour courses in the major curriculum. This change to four hours credit, we firmly believe, will increase the expectation for quality research from our majors.

## 4) Independent Research Courses and Senior Theses

These courses involve individual research and scholarly investigation under faculty supervision. Small groups of students or a single thesis student work independently for academic credit under the supervision of a faculty member on topics related to that faculty member’s research. These courses require students to expand and deepen their understanding of a literary critical topic and the research methods applied to its study. Students formulate research questions, develop a working knowledge of relevant primary and secondary sources, and hone their skills in academic writing through conferences with the supervising faculty member and through multiple drafting. Course products include research proposals, essays, annotated bibliographies, and project reports.

Since these courses are taken only with the permission of the instructor, they tend to attract students with some experience in research-based critical writing, experience that comes mainly from *Literary Methods*

and from our upper-division seminars. Most of these students know how to define a topic of appropriate scope and significance. We encourage students in these classes to formulate an arguable question at issue at the very start of the semester, and then we set them on a course of reading primary and secondary texts so they can, by mid-semester, develop an argumentative claim and compile an annotated bibliography of secondary sources relevant to this claim. We read multiple drafts of proposals and essays in these courses to move students, by the end of the semester, toward the articulation of a discipline-specific interpretive argument that shows an understanding of the current state of work in the chosen field. The Department intends to offer more opportunities to students for this kind of independent research in the immediate future.