

May 2002
Report to Dean Marilyn Hoskin

English 401 Review Committee Report

Overview of Committee Process, Input, and Information Collected

The English 401 Review Committee met biweekly throughout the academic year (from early October until mid-May). We had meetings with several groups and individuals, including Professor Cinthia Gannett, Director of WAC and the Writing Center (November 7); a group of English 401 instructors and teaching assistants (December 5); and a representative group of 14 former English 401 students (February 20). A brief report on the student focus group is included in the Appendix to this report. We examined several types of documents from English 401 to increase our understanding of the course, student work, and student reactions. Specifically, the Committee examined representative syllabi from across the many sections of English 401; student evaluations of English 401 from selected sections from Fall 2001; and random selections of student portfolios from Fall 2001 sections of the course. In addition, we wrote and administered a faculty survey to gauge faculty beliefs and concerns about writing and English 401. This was sent to all full-time faculty at UNH. A report on the survey is included in the Appendix. We also examined grade distribution data for English 401 and several other typical first-year courses for our discussion of grading practices; a brief report on the grade distributions is also included in the Appendix.

Professor Thomas Newkirk provided the committee with both a mission statement for English 401 and a self-study that was sent to the outside evaluators prior to their visit. Both are included in the Appendix.

Finally, we arranged for a campus visit by a two-member team of outside evaluators from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). They visited campus in April. We asked that the evaluators help us in our examination of English 401, but it should be pointed out that we and they recognize that English 401 is part of the larger writing effort at UNH. The Committee has focused on English 401, and our report and recommendations reflect this. The WPA evaluators, in their report (included in the Appendix), make recommendations about the course, and they also make recommendations about broader issues concerning the writing program at UNH. Their report will thus be useful for questions about the more general program, as well as for our Committee's recommendations and conclusions. Given our mission of focusing on English 401, however, we do not comment on the WPA report recommendations that are not specific to the course.

Strengths of the English 401 Program

There is much to admire about English 401, and especially about the talented instructors who teach in the program. They are dedicated, knowledgeable and creative. English 401 teachers form a community dedicated to mutual support and sharing of ideas, and we would like to commend them for their work on writing with first year students.

In particular we appreciate that English 401 serves an important function in providing a general introduction to University level learning. In this role, the small class size of English 401 is important. Student conferences allow for one-on-one teaching and promote a context in which each student's voice is considered individually and treated as important. Students are aware of, and respond positively to, these strengths of English 401.

Finally, we note that many sections of English 401 functions effectively to introduce students to college level writing by integrating assignments of personal, critical and research writing. In many sections the vision of writing as a process that necessarily requires revision is successfully conveyed, as are the importance of grammar, correct spelling, proofreading and the like. Our concerns and recommendations should be read in the light of our appreciation for the substantial accomplishments of English 401.

Committee Concerns and Recommendations

1. Consistency of English 401 Goals and Standards

Based on our review of course syllabi, student portfolios, and our focus group meeting with students we have concerns over the consistency of English 401. Consistency is a particularly important issue in a course which is required of all students at UNH. Students routinely compare the amount and kind of writing they are required to do, and variations in grading policies. While it is unreasonable to expect complete uniformity across all sections of English 401, we recommend that measures be taken in order to enhance consistency of (a) course syllabi, (b) kinds and amount of writing assignments, and (c) grading/student evaluation.

- (a) Course syllabi should clearly and transparently reflect the mission statement of English 401, and its companion outcomes statement. Every student should receive a copy of the mission statement and the English 401 Handbook, which should be revised to include a discussion of the expected outcomes of the course. The syllabus should make clear to every student in every section how he or she will be evaluated.

- (b) Kinds and amounts of writing assignments should be consistent across sections of the course. The writing assignments should reflect the mission statement of English 401, and should be clearly connected to the objectives of the course.

- (c) Grading and Student Evaluation. It should be made clear to every student in every section how s/he will be evaluated. In order to achieve this we recommend that the syllabi be transparent and consistent across all sections of 401 with regard to grading. The committee is concerned about the use of portfolios in the course and the mechanism by which students are evaluated. The program needs to be clear about the purpose of portfolios in the overall process, including how students are graded. We recommend that student work be assessed on an ongoing basis. Students should have an idea of their grade in English 401 by mid-semester. Finally, we think that grades should reflect the quality of the student writing as well as the process of writing and revision.

- (d) We recommend that the Writing Program develop a course evaluation form that clearly reflects the mission statement of English 401.

2. Preparation of Instructors

Approximately 100 sections of English 401 are offered each year, staffed by teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, teaching assistants, and tenure-track faculty. (For a full description of English 401 staffing see the Freshman English Self-Study in the appendix). The committee is concerned about the number of new and inexperienced teachers of English 401 especially in fall semester. We are also concerned about the relatively heavy reliance on adjunct and per course instructors (13 out of 60 sections were taught by adjuncts in Fall 01). We recommend more training and mentoring of inexperienced instructors. We recommend that experienced instructors receive appropriate mentoring and career development advice. We recommend that no first semester TAs teach sections of English 401 independently, although there are other appropriate roles for them in English 401 during their first semester in graduate work at UNH. This change will add to the consistency of English 401, and will bring its procedures in line with other graduate programs at UNH.

We recognize that each of our recommendations will require additional resources especially the recommendation to stop staffing English 401 with first semester teaching assistants. Our recommendations will require:

- additional resources for lecturers or adjuncts to cover approximately 8 sections
- a more balanced number of sections in Fall and Spring semesters
- more regular English faculty teaching in Fall semester
- compensation for mentoring of inexperienced TAs.

--more release time for administrators to foster career development

3. Research and Critical Thinking/Writing

English 401 courses include a research paper, but this component is rather vaguely defined and can encourage assignments that fail to prepare students for the kind of writing they will be expected to do in other courses. It is essential that students be trained in the modes of critical thought and the conventions of academic discourse that they will encounter in other courses. Accordingly, we recommend that instead of focusing on a single, extended project, 401 teachers should address, throughout the semester, specific skills relevant to the structure, content, and presentation of conventional academic essays--that is, essays in which a writer is called upon to analyze information, participate in scholarly debates, and present a persuasive argument. Students should learn, for example, to identify a topic that identifies grounds for debate or cause for confusion, and they should learn how to formulate a thesis that addresses that topic persuasively.

English 401 cannot prepare students for the writing and research methods required by every discipline, but this course can help students develop basic research skills and learn how to present their findings clearly and persuasively. Students should learn, for example, the difference between a response based on one's opinion, and a conclusion supported by research. They should be able to summarize the information and arguments of scholarly publications, and they should be able to evaluate the relative value of multiple and even contradictory sources. They should learn to incorporate quotations effectively and to cite their sources (while learning that they will need to identify the citation conventions for individual disciplines for their other courses). Finally, students should receive careful instruction on plagiarism--both in its blatant forms (reprinting, without attribution, another writer's work) and in its more subtle forms (relying too heavily on another's work or echoing someone else's ideas without attribution).

4. Grammar and Basic Writing Skills

Both students and faculty across the campus have expressed concern about the perception that English 401 does not emphasize sufficiently basic writing skills, including basic English grammar. Our recommendation is twofold. First, we want to emphasize that many instructors of English 401 do teach grammar in the context of teaching writing, and that grammar instruction ought to be an integral piece of the writing skills taught in English 401. Second, we believe that there needs to be a mechanism developed to address the needs of those students who arrive on campus lacking certain skills. One suggestion, which we endorse, is a 1-credit add-on course which will be available to all students, and required of some students (who will be identified by their English 401 teacher during the first 2 weeks of the semester). This course might be situated in the Writing Center, and staffed by first semester TAs among others.

5. Communication to the Campus Community

There is a disconnect between the objectives and accomplishments of English 401, and the expectations of faculty across the campus. This has engendered misunderstanding on both sides. We recommend that serious attention be given to the means by which other faculty, particularly faculty involved in writing intensive courses, can come to understand the mission of English 401, and encourage them to reinforce and build upon the writing foundation of English 401. For example, both the English 401 Mission Statement and the outcomes assessment should be widely and regularly disseminated on campus, faculty should be encouraged to communicate with English 401 instructors and composition faculty informally and formally to express their concerns and suggestions and to engage in constructive dialogue, and the Provost and Dean could facilitate meetings among UNH faculty concerned about writing, the composition faculty and English 401 instructors.

6. Administrative Structure and Support

We are concerned that one faculty member with only a 2 course release is administering 100 sections of English 401 with all that this entails. In order to realize many of our recommendations, especially those regarding training and evaluation of teachers, the administrative structure of English 401 must be changed. We recommend an additional course release for the director, and the addition of 2 associate directors each with a course release. We think that more use could and should be made of experienced teachers to mentor and visit the classes of relatively inexperienced teachers, and to organize workshops with appropriate compensation.

7. Outcomes and Assessment

In light of the recommendations for changes in English 401, which will require more resources, we recommend that the director develop an outcomes statement for English 401 so that progress can be assessed (using the WPA model or some other appropriate resource). The outcomes statement should reflect, and expand upon, the goals of English 401 as articulated by the mission statement. We also recommend that the Director develop a mechanism to assess whether the program is achieving its intended objectives.

8. Implementation

Full implementation of these recommendations will require resources, time, and program development on the part of the English 401 faculty and staff. To facilitate the implementation work, we recommend that the Dean appoint a small committee of faculty to work with the Dean to implement the recommendations and to maintain communication about English 401.