

June 2, 2008
Report on Retreat: Department of English

Chair: Nancy Bradbury
Curriculum Committee Chair: Michael Thurston

Retreat date, May 15, 2008

Department faculty in attendance. Ann Boutelle, Nancy Bradbury, Floyd Cheung, Nora Crow, Craig Davis, Dean Flower, Luc Gilleman, Ambreen Hai, Elizabeth Harries, Jeff Hunter, Gillian Kendall, Naomi Miller, Rick Millington, Bill Oram, Cornelia Pearsall, Sharon Seelig, Pat Skarda, Michael Thurston. Our departing Mellon fellow, Danielle Elliot, joined us for the final part of the retreat and the dinner. All members present and teaching for spring semester attended the retreat.

No guest speakers.

Goals for the retreat. 1) Through written responses collected in advance, gather up-to-date information about the following: future teaching plans of all members, extent of the department's teaching of research skills, use of the College's collections in teaching, and offering of First-Year and Presidential seminars. 2) Decide how best to present our students with "roadmaps" through our major. 3) Come up with some concrete and practical measures for improving our honors program. 4) Decide whether we are satisfied with a single required seminar as our "culminating experience," or whether we should augment it. 5) Discuss our future hiring plans and strategies for sustaining the quality of our major despite a 12% reduction (20.5 to 18 FTE) between 2002 and the time of our next departure.

Outcomes.

1) Information about our teaching of research skills, use of collections, etc., appears at the end of this report.

2) We had a productive discussion of what kinds of "roadmaps" we might offer and how we should present them on our website.

3) We came up with a variety of promising ideas for improving our honors program, including the following: in our 200-level courses and seminars, help students who may be interested in honors to identify workable topics for theses; consult our list of junior majors in early spring and suggest honors to especially talented readers, researchers, and writers; take more care in approving proposals; consider appointing second readers at the time we review proposals and asking both readers to sign the proposal; encourage potential honor students to advance their skills by taking a theory course and taking a seminar in the junior year; ask our visiting writers to supervise fiction or poetry-writing honors projects for our most talented creative writers.

4) We discussed a possible addition to the seminar requirement that serves as our present culminating experience, a proposal that we are calling “seminar plus.” Most seemed to agree that the single required seminar is not now providing our majors with sufficiently independent and advanced work along the lines suggested by the Smith Design and the working group on purposeful inquiry. While a single seminar provides some opportunities for sustained work on individual authors or texts or themes, it does not, in many cases, enable or require really independent or advanced work. To remedy this, we discussed a possible “capstone experience” that requires students to continue their seminar work in one of a number of ways. Students might take a special studies in which they built on the work of a course (not necessarily a seminar) independently. They might write an honors thesis. They might participate in a yearlong Kahn Institute colloquium, developing ideas they began to work with in a course (again, not necessarily a seminar). Or they might take a second seminar and use that opportunity to try more independent work once they've experienced a seminar and “learned the ropes.”

5) We are faced with so many variables right now that it is almost impossible to come to any firm conclusions about future hiring, and we didn't. Among the variables: What fields will next year's welcome new hire bring to the department? With over half our full-time teaching staff at 55 or older, what will be the fields and the timing of departures among those who decide to retire in the next 3-10 years? The department should perhaps return to the question of future staffing in spring 2009 when we at least know the fields of our new hire.

Plans to achieve outcomes.

We ended our retreat by forming working groups to bring concrete proposals to the curriculum committee and/or the department in 2008-09.

“Roadmaps” through our curriculum: Millington, Pearsall, Seelig

Toward an improved honors program: Hai (director 2008-09), Gorra (director 2009-10), Davis (fall), Kendall, Gilleman

Enhanced communications: Boutelle (fall), Hunter (fall), Cheung (spring), Oram, Bradbury

Culminating experience (“seminar plus” proposal): Patey (Curriculum committee chair, 2008-09), Flower, Oram, Skarda, Crow (fall), Thurston (spring), Bradbury

How our plans advance departmental goals as outlined in our decennial report of 2003.

The agenda for our retreat was driven more by the Smith Design than by our decennial.

Our outside reviewers in 2003 devoted the lion's share of their report to the urgency of the department's need to hire: “If we had one short-term wish for the department, it is that they be allowed to make a sequence of two junior hires over the next two years.”

Our welcome search next year finally grants half their wish for us. They suggested that we revisit in a few years our uneasy decision based on a very close vote to substitute ENG 199 for ENG 200 and 201 as the foundation of our major. We have already revisited that decision, and we worked out a compromise by which we require 2 of 4 gateway courses: Eng 199, Eng 200, Eng 201 or Eng 231 (American Literature Before 1865), which allows both students and advisers more leeway to find the best fit with a

student's interests and high school preparation. Our decennial reviewers expressed concern about our shrinking honors program, an issue we did address at our retreat. They encouraged us to offer a wider range of creative writing options, and the suggestion of a fiction and a poetry thesis each year offers the prospect of a modest step in that direction. Finally, at the time of our decennial, we had just agreed to require a seminar as a culminating experience, a move our reviewers lauded, and now we are contemplating further movement in that direction in the form of the "seminar plus" proposal. If adopted, this proposal will require us to offer a wider range of seminars, also a recommendation of our decennial reviewers.

How does the department plan to integrate the list of intellectual capacities into the major?

Our major is *about* two of the most critical capacities: reading closely and writing well. Every reputable liberal arts college has a strong and sizeable English department for precisely this reason. At Smith and elsewhere, the English department remains the chief literacy engine of an undergraduate education. The Smith Design calls for enabling our students to acquire, express, and use knowledge effectively. All departments and programs teach their students to acquire and use knowledge, but English is the primary department for teaching them to express their knowledge in clear and well-chosen words. We do nearly half our teaching at the 100-level so that we may staff many more writing intensive courses than needed to serve our own prospective majors. To English majors, the department imparts both comparative and historical perspectives in a wide range of courses at all levels from colloquia to seminars. Many of us are comparatists by training as well as by inclination, and all of us are committed to the historical dimension of literary study.

Commitment to research and other forms of purposeful inquiry. Our plans for improving our honors program and for enhancing our culminating experience fall under this rubric and are outlined above under "Outcomes." If the department endorses some form of the "seminar plus" idea, the number of students already working individually with English department faculty members will become more visible and even more students will take advantage of special studies, Kahn projects, honors theses, and seminars. Our retreat included a useful discussion of what research means in our discipline. A barebones definition would include finding, evaluating, and properly citing information about literature, whether from printed or Internet sources. Above the basic level, research for undergraduate English majors involves the finding, evaluating, and citing of information as applied to literary questions that the student devises for herself. The information sought by our students will often be textual, biographical, or historical, or take the form of reviews or interpretive readings by professional critics.

Introducing students to campus resources for research and inquiry. The members of the English department involve students with the College's outstanding collections in many courses: the summary that follows is not exhaustive, but gives a sense of the kinds of uses we make of these resources. We all expect our students to use the core collection in Neilson Library. Some courses introduce more specialized materials: for example, Narratives of Internment includes a session on government documents. Many English

courses visit the Mortimer Rare Book Room: these include Eng 199, Chaucer, Victorian Medievalism, What Jane Austen Read, and Shakespeare. A number of instructors plan future use of the Rare Book Room in existing or in newly designed courses. Courses in which the students visit the Art Museum (often to write about some work in its collection) include Reading and Writing Short Poems, Asian American Autobiography, Introduction to the Study of American Society and Culture, and Reading the Landscape. Courses that introduce students to the botanical gardens and plant house include FYS Adaptation, FYS Reading the Earth, and Green Victoria; here too more courses are in the planning stages.

Participation in First Year Seminars and Presidential Seminars. First Year Seminars already taught or scheduled for next year include Celtic Worlds, Icelandic Sagas, Groves of Academe, Literature and Science: Models of Time and Space, Adaptations, Reenacting the Past, Ghosts, The End of the World as We Know It, and Reading the Earth. Nearly everyone would like in the future to convert an English 120 or develop a new FYS; some possibilities include The Uses of Storytelling, Mysteries and Investigations, Asian American Identities, Asian Americans and the Law, Reading the Landscape, The English Caribbean: Past and Present, Love Stories, Shakespeare and Film, Utopias, and Reading Hard Books. We have a Presidential Seminar on the books, *Beowulf* and Archaeology, and one in the works called Bodies and Machines; many colleagues report appealing new ideas in progress.

Copies of these handouts from the retreat packet are attached to this report:

- Advance assignment for the retreat
- List of projects from the Smith Design particularly relevant to the English department
- List of compelling ideas from an MLA/Teagle national study of the major in English and foreign languages in which President Christ participated.

Preparation for Spring Retreat

Section One: Written Responses

Please gather your thoughts in writing as you think through the following questions. Send your responses to Bobbie by Friday, 2 May, so that they may be included in a packet to be distributed to department members the following week.

1. What do you currently do in your courses to teach research skills? Are there specific assignments you have found especially useful or effective? Do you emphasize different aspects or types of research in different courses?
2. Please describe anything you currently do in your courses to introduce students to the College's collections (Botanical Gardens, Museum of Art, Libraries, Rare Book Room, College Archive, Sophia Smith Collection). Do you envision new courses or components of courses that might involve any of these collections?
3. Please describe any current or planned teaching in the First-Year Seminar and Presidential Seminar programs.
4. Please sketch a pathway through the major that a student with interests in your field might be advised to take. Include specific gateway courses, surveys, and specialized courses. Consider courses outside the department that such a student ought to take. (Three examples are attached.)
5. To help with long-range curricular planning, please sketch – in a general way – your teaching plans for the next five to seven years. What new courses do you plan to develop?

Section Two: Questions to Think About

We will spend some time at our retreat discussing our major's capstone experience and developing a strategy for seeking positions. Please give some thought to these questions before we meet on 15 May.

1. Is the seminar a satisfactory capstone for the major? If not, could we re-imagine or re-describe the seminar so that it becomes a satisfactory capstone? Or do you have other ideas for a capstone experience that might replace or augment the current seminar requirement?
2. When the department seeks new positions from College Hall, should it continue to conceptualize and describe those positions in terms of period specialization? Are there other ways of thinking about positions (i.e. genre across periods, focus on a specific conceptual problem as manifested across periods)? How can we shape the department over the next ten years so that it most effectively performs a core mission to which we can commit?

Projects particularly relevant to the English Department from the College's strategic plan
(excerpted from the Smith Design by NMB)

From the plan's "Foundational Commitments": "Foster the integration of teaching and scholarship through enhanced pedagogical resources and more effective research support."

I. Essential knowledge and skills

1. Our students should learn to think critically and analytically so that they may acquire, express, and use knowledge effectively. They need to write and speak well, read closely, evaluate and present evidence accurately, and work both independently and collaboratively.
2. They should develop historical and comparative perspectives; learn at least one foreign language; study the historical development of societies, cultures, and philosophies; and understand multi- and interdisciplinary approaches.
3. Faculty should provide students with 'roadmaps' for structuring their Smith experience in meaningful ways, both within and beyond the major, so that students and their advisers may chart coherent undergraduate programs.

II. Special emphasis on research, inquiry, and discovery

As one of a small number of "research colleges," Smith combines the teaching mission of a liberal arts college with a vigorous tradition of faculty scholarship conducted at a level more often associated with a research university.

To make student research and inquiry a focal point of a Smith education, the College will

1. Enhance and expand opportunities for students to engage in meaningful scholarly work with faculty so that they learn early on the rigor and intellectual pleasure of discovery and deep engagement.
2. Implement a sequential approach to research that provides first year students with an introduction to research skills and then allows each student to build her skills and knowledge over the course of four years, culminating in a significant research project near the end of her time at Smith.
3. Develop departmental and interdisciplinary junior and senior seminars.
4. Increase opportunities for students to make serious use of the College's outstanding educational resources, including the botanical garden, Museum of Art, libraries, and special collections (Rare Book Room, Sophia Smith Collection, College Archive).
5. Make faculty research more visible to students to help motivate them and to model the life of a scholar.

III. Helping our students prepare for rewarding lives

The College will

1. Prepare students to examine their own career goals and anticipate the likelihood that the nature of their work may change many times over the course of their careers.
2. Help provide interaction between current undergraduates and alumnae who can mentor students and model lives well lived.

Ideas from a national working group upon which President Christ is serving, charged with discussing the major in English and foreign languages.

From Carol Christ

MLA Teagle Assignment

Here are the ideas I found compelling in our discussion:

- Majors in both English and foreign languages and literature at once offer and concern the imaginative experience of reading and interpreting works of literature, with all of the aesthetic pleasure, historical particularity, and human significance that entails. The capacity to read, enjoy, understand, and interpret literature is fundamental to a liberal education.
- A major in English or in a foreign language and literature should have a clear sense of sequence, in which students move from less to more complex analytic projects, building upon the knowledge and skills they have acquired. It is ideal for a major to culminate in a capstone project of some sort--a senior seminar requiring a long paper, for example, or a thesis.
- A major in English or in a foreign language should have at least two small classes in the junior and senior years. These classes should be designed in such a way that develops students' writing and speaking abilities.
- A major in English or in a foreign language should provide the opportunity to study a single work at length and in depth. Departments should resist the impulse to increase coverage at the expense of extensive engagement with a great and complex work of literature.
- Majors in both English and in foreign languages should reflect awareness of the international context and reach of the language and literature of their focus.
- The English major should require proficiency in a language other than English.
- Departments should work to integrate study abroad opportunities into their majors.
- Departments should take the opportunity to reflect not only upon their major but upon the relationship of the capacities it builds to the goals of a liberal education. They should think carefully about how the major that they offer relates to general education requirements.