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Request to the Faculty Assembly for a Two-Year Pilot Program in ENG 150

The English Department is asking permission to change the number of common texts in ENG 150 from five common texts to two common texts as a pilot program (for two years, unless curriculum changes make such a pilot null and void).

For the reasons cited below, the Department believes it can provide students with a more substantive, interesting, and rigorous first-year experience while still fulfilling the existing goals and objectives of the Common Core Curriculum, especially those that focus on academic writing, critical thinking, and analysis.

Please note: We are not requesting any other changes in ENG 150. The course's goals and objectives, its themes, its commitment to academic writing, and even our assessment instruments for the course would all remain the same. We are simply asking for more flexibility in the texts used in the course. Instructors will continue to teach a minimum of five substantial texts in each class, one of which must be an international or global work.

We will assess the success of the pilot using the approach in Appendix A below.

I. CURRENT PRACTICE

Currently, Department members agree to five common readings.* In theory, instructors are allowed to add one or two readings of their own choice. In practice, though, there's very little opportunity to add works other than the common readings when the course also addresses basic writing, research, and analytical skills and includes the provision/requirement of multiple drafts of papers.

As a result, most of the sections of ENG 150 (which amount to between 12 and 16 sections per semester) use only the common texts.

II. ISSUES BEHIND THE REQUEST

Three key issues have surfaced over the last several years of teaching this first-year course:

● *Limited Text Selection and Rigor/Substance*: Recognizing the centrality of the course to the first-year experience—and its importance in helping students grow both academically and morally—the Department believes that, with the limited time available (one semester), it can offer a stronger and more rigorous experience if the selection of texts had a much greater chance of reflecting both the instructor's strengths and the Common Core goals and objectives. Anchoring the course in two significant common texts will provide continuity while a selection of equally challenging texts of the instructor's choice will provide students with an additional layer of perspectives and experiences.

● *Plagiarism*: With common readings making up so much of the course, the possibility of plagiarism is high no matter how much instructors try to differentiate assignments. Given the

small number of core texts—and the common kinds of academic writing experiences the course needs to provide—after just a single semester, the pool of papers available for "resubmission" is significant.

● *Keeping Writing Central*: Individual instructors could certainly expand the existing course by making more use of their own readings, or, as a department, we could enlarge the list of core readings. But in each case, we would have to give only passing consideration to writing, research, and documentation.

III. REQUEST

We are submitting this proposal for 30-day review as per the protocol. We would like to reduce the number of common readings in ENG 150 to two—most likely one play by Shakespeare and one Greek tragedy or comedy. We believe that the agreement on two "essential" works will be easy to reach and will substantially "ground" the themes and perspectives of the course. (We also believe, as a result of our experience teaching this course over the last ten years, that this approach is preferable to a "category" approach (defining selections by genre). Instructors would then be able to choose their own texts to supplement these readings—always in light of the goals and objectives for the course and of the University mission.

Such flexibility in the choice of texts has already been afforded to the Capstone course. We would like to pilot an arrangement that is similarly flexible.

We believe students, in the end, will benefit from a better, more exciting, more unique first-year experience; with such flexibility, we can remain true to the university's mission and improve first-year retention.

* Currently, 75 percent of the course's readings must be common readings; 25 percent is left to the instructor's choice. Because of the emphasis on writing and multiple drafts, though, the common readings tend to account for nearly all of the readings in the course.

APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT

We will be defining success as an increase in student engagement—and we will be measuring engagement via the quality, complexity, and thoughtfulness of the work we look at the end of the school year.

Given that none of the learning goals, objectives, or requirements for ENG 150 will change, the Department believes it will be able to make effective use of its existing assessments for ENG 150. These assessments currently include:

1. DIRECT MEASURE: A rubric-based assessment of college-level writing skills—including thesis, development, organization, attribution, and mechanics—used with the research paper assignment that's done in all sections of the courses. We began using this rubric in 2010, so we will have two years of comparative data on student performance as baseline data. Papers in this assessment are awarded a score of between 5 (superlative) and 1 (unacceptable), and tracking changes in the number of papers receiving the various grades will give us an indication of changes in student performance.

2. DIRECT MEASURE: A rubric-based assessment of the course's affective component—personal change and growth—used with an end-of-the-semester writing prompt involving a student's personal interaction with a piece of literature studied. Again, tracking changes in the scores papers receive in a given year will allow us to determine changes in performance. We will have comparative data from 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 as a baseline.

3. INDIRECT MEASURE: At the suggestion of the dean of arts and sciences, we will add a short (perhaps half a page) assignment to be submitted with the final draft of the final paper of the term asking students to assess what they've learned about writing and how they learned it.

4. OTHER MEASURE: The questions on the back of the teacher evaluation form will also allow us to gauge student's self-reported engagement with specific texts.

MOTION

Be it resolved that the English Department be permitted to change the number of common texts in ENG 150 from five common texts to two common texts as a pilot program for two years (as outlined in the Proposal submitted to the Faculty Assembly on 13 April 2011), unless curriculum changes make such a pilot null and void.