

Pellissippi State Technical Community College- English

Academic Audit Report- May 2014

I. Introduction

On April 10, 2013, an Academic Auditor Team consisting of three members, chaired by Kristin Rich, Walters State Community College, and including Deidre Garriott, University of Tennessee, and Elizabeth White, Motlow State Community College, conducted a Site Visit of the English program at Pellissippi State Technical Community College. The faculty of the English program had completed an extensive self-study of its program in Fall 2013 resulting in an Academic Audit self-study document that focused on its General Education courses designed to satisfy the Communication requirements for the Associates degree program and those courses designed to transfer to 4 year institutes.

Team members had received copies of the self-study report in February, 2014, for review and study. Prior to the site visit, each member of the team suggested questions to be asked during the scheduled on-site sessions with administrative leaders, faculty, and students. On the evening before the site visit, the auditor team met to review these questions and to finalize assignments for both the site visit sessions and the subsequent writing of the Auditor Team report.

On the day of the site visit, the Auditors and representatives from the Pellissippi State faculty and administration met for the welcome session. The schedule for the site visit of the English program followed a standard site visit format. The opening session was followed by four separate conversations with the following: 1) group session with full time faculty; 2) group session with adjunct faculty; 3) group session with students who were or had been in one of the English courses; 4) group session with full-time faculty. The Auditors then convened for lunch, discussion, and the writing of the summary report. The final event was an exit session with Auditors, English faculty, and college administrators at which the Auditor Team presented the summary report.

After the site visit, Audit team members each drafted a section of the report, which was sent to the Team Leader. The Team Leader drafted a preliminary report and sent it to team members via email for their review. This final report was then completed and submitted to the TBR for distribution to the English program at Pellissippi State Technical Community College.

II. Overall Performance

The English program at Pellissippi State Technical Community College is distinguished by its enthusiastic faculty members who are a mutually respectful and collegial team. Perhaps, because of the size and closeness of the faculty, many practices are shared informally and through one-to-one relationships. While these are effective, it may be more beneficial to formalize the process. Throughout the self-study and the site visit, it was evident that the faculty recognized the importance of making ongoing improvements and are committed to doing so.

The self-study report itself reflects a process undertaken by the English faculty to more fully understand and document its current quality processes and potential initiatives for improvement. The

self-study process and report were marked by candor: weaknesses were identified, and actions were planned to address these weaknesses.

The visiting team's conversations with members of the faculty and students not only affirmed the accuracy and value of this self-study report, but also revealed more clearly both the successes and the challenges of the English program. The English students themselves gave every indication of being a great resource for the continuous improvement of the program. The use of feedback from current students may help elucidate and reform the program's objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment measures. The self-study included three initiatives for improvement that included increasing communication efforts between full-time and adjunct faculty with formal documentation of these communications, revising learning objectives for relevancy, and investigating assessment tools to determine efficiency and applicability of learning objectives.

III. Performance in the Focal Areas

1. Learning Objectives

The audit committee was impressed with the English Department's commitment to ongoing assessment and consideration of their courses' objectives. We were especially amazed with the ways that the department used extracurricular clubs and groups as sites in which to extend instruction regarding learning outcomes. The following paragraphs contain affirmations and recommendations based on the self-study in Focal Area 1 and comments made by full-time faculty, adjunct instructors, and students during the site visit.

In the English Department's Academic Self-Study, the study states that the department "divides learning objectives into two categories: Course Goals, which are broadly stated, and Expected Learning Outcomes, which are more specific and measurable" (4) and furthermore that only 50% of the faculty include the learning outcomes on their course syllabi, noting that "the divide broke largely along generational lines, with more senior faculty listing only the goals" (5). Moreover, the study mentions that the department has engaged in discussions about whether or not the inclusion of the learning outcomes should be required on all customized syllabi. In the audit team's Affirmation #4, the team "affirm[s] the need to improve the emphasis of student learning outcomes and to clearly post them on the syllabi" (On Site Evaluation Checklist 2). Transparency is always a best practice in any learning environment. Disclosing the learning outcomes—how a student's practices are assessed and measured—provides the student with agency in her education. This transparency will help students understand the way their work, whether written or otherwise, is assessed, and it also helps them toward achieving the course goals. As the self-study itself points out, "For many students, calling attention to learning outcomes throughout the semester and making the connection in students' minds between lessons and those outcomes could be a valuable yardstick against which they could measure their progress toward their goal and remain motivated to move through the courses...[and] would help eliminate any sense of 'busywork' or randomness" (5). This, we believe, is why transparency of learning outcomes is important. It can help keep the teacher on track and ensure that no work is "busywork" or

randomly assigned without a specific purpose, and it helps the students understand the relevance of each assignment.

Additionally, including the learning outcomes on all syllabi would likely clarify some of the uncertainty we heard students express about what they were supposed to learn and what skills and knowledge should be transferred to other classes. During the audit, the students told the team that students were supposed to learn “the basics” and MLA style in ENGL 1010. However, the students also articulated that they did not know “what MLA is for.” With learning outcomes included, such confusion may be ameliorated, and students may be better prepared to articulate and understand the ways that knowledge and skills they learn in 1010, in particular, and in all classes, more generally, transfer to other classes within and outside of the English Department. Students also suggested that grading is inconsistent, with one student saying that grading standards “[depend] on the teacher.” The team recognized that the department actively worked toward grading consistency through the grading workshops, but this comment and its affirmation from other students suggested that there is still inconsistency in grading, or at the very least- the perception of inconsistency. Including learning outcomes would help to create consistency in grading and would articulate expectations.

The emphasis of student outcomes on the syllabus would not only improve transparency and student comprehension of expectations and skillsets, but including the learning outcomes would also help students take more responsibility for their work, because they would have a clear understanding of both teacher expectations and assessment. In *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP), these associations agree that “habits of the mind” support student learning, and that “responsibility” as a habit of the mind encourages students to take ownership of their work and consequences for certain actions (1). Including the learning outcomes, clearly expresses expectations and assessment criteria and would, therefore, better communicate student responsibilities and consequences. It would make responsibility a habit of the mind in these courses, and this habit will transfer to other disciplines and classes. Moreover, including the learning outcomes and would allow students to provide more informed responses to assessments of instructors. Thus, stating the learning outcomes on the course syllabus would improve both student learning and programmatic assessment. This audit affirms the discussion of including learning outcomes for these reasons and encourages more emphasis, and consistency of emphasis, of these outcomes on the syllabi.

However, the team commends the English Department for its ease of rapport with the student body. Although, the students expressed ambivalence and, at times, confusion about the ENGL 1010 and 1020 courses, they noted that they learned how to write essays that broke from the rigid five-paragraph model. Breaking from this model is, indeed, a transferrable skill that transcends academic genre and discipline. The English Department has certainly done good work in redefining the genre of academic writing for first-year students by breaking down their expectations of the five-paragraph essay model. Students also noted that they were aware of the importance of structure in writing and stated that they transferred this knowledge with them to other academic courses. This knowledge, combined with the more open academic essay model, is a sound foundation upon which both the English Department and other departments at Pellissippi State Community College may build. Moreover, the students’

acknowledgement of these lessons suggests that when learning outcomes are made evident, students recognize what they have learned and how it has the capability to transfer to other disciplines or rhetorical situations.

The self-study also indicated ongoing professional associations as “an important source of feedback” in the department’s defining of course goals and outcomes (5). The department’s self-study mentioned both formal and informal consultations, including regular participation in the Two-Year College Association of Tennessee and some attendance at conferences. The audit team affirmed and encouraged such outside consultations, but also suggested that the department look to other disciplinary associations, such as the NCTE, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and WPA. All of these associations are sensitive to the unique demands of teaching and learning at two-year institutions and provide support for these schools. Moreover, active involvement in these associations would serve to improve the entire department, including the department’s commitment to assessment. In *Writing Assessment: A Position Statement*, the CCCC argues that assessment should be “solidly grounded in the latest research on learning, writing, and assessment” (“Guiding Principles for Assessment”). This research is emerging from CCCC, NCTE, and WPA, to name a few disciplinary entities. Attending and presenting at annual conferences, serving on relevant committees, and consulting statements on policies and best practices are ideal ways to inform both the department and its various curricular programs. In addition to the NCTE, CCCC, and WPA, the English department should invest more time, participation, and consultation with the AWPA to continue to enhance the department’s commitment to creative writing education. These associations speak to the department’s desire to revise and enhance learning outcomes and objectives.

In addition to consulting professional disciplinary associations, the team recommended that the department should increase communication with their transfer schools. We recommended this, in part, because students shared inaccurate facts they had been told about transferring to these schools, and students also expressed some anxiety about the transfer process. More importantly, however, improved contact with the transfer schools can and should inform the department’s curriculum to ensure that the department is preparing its student body to transfer to these four-year institutions. Creating stronger professional relationships with the transfer schools would improve both advising practices, and the curriculum. This way, students would know that they are being provided the most accurate information about the transfer schools, and the department would be secure in knowing that their curriculum had prepared their students for education beyond Pellissippi.

The Writing Center, however, is a neglected site in which connections with writing learning outcomes could be extended beyond the traditional classroom. During the onsite visit, the faculty explained that the English Department does not direct, manage, or fund the Writing Center, but noted that faculty in the department had worked in the Center, in cases when their classes did not meet capacity and had been cancelled. The department also remarked that Teresa Lopez had been working to improve relationships with the Center, and that the dean was in contact with the Center’s director. Students, however, were disparaging about the Writing Center. They noted that it was only beneficial for citation assistance, but also remarked that they never used it as a writing resource, and that it had a reputation for “not [giving] the greatest advice” or inconsistency. They also indicated that their English

professors had discouraged the use of the Center, and that they were unaware of its location. The team emphasizes that this is all second-hand information, as none of the students with whom we met had visited the Writing Center, and they preferred to see their English professor first and foremost for advice. However, hearing comments about the Writing Center's poor reputation among students was and continues to be disheartening, particularly if the faculty is contributing to the center's low opinion by discouraging students' use of the resource.

Because the Writing Center is a site of writing instruction, it would benefit from help and support from the English Department. Moreover, any improvement that the English Department could provide would also benefit the entire campus. The team affirms the department's work to improve relationships with the Writing Center and hopes that these relationships result in a better, more reliable pedagogical atmosphere for students, as well as a more credible site of professionalization among the people hired to work there. Finally, the English Department should invest in the Writing Center because it is a place where learning outcomes will be addressed.

The department has clearly succeeded in using creative writing extracurricular activities to help students achieve learning objectives, but the team noted that most extracurricular activities are limited to students in creative writing. While this recommendation will be discussed at greater length in Focal Area 2: Curriculum and Co-Curriculum, it is worth noting that the team's first recommendation was to increase awareness of extracurricular opportunities to students across the campuses. The Strawberry Plains campus has a very active creative writing group. Encouraging participation in this group among all the campuses would foster a stronger sense of community.

The team additionally recommended that the faculty increase its own digital literacy and use of instructional technology to prepare students better for the requirements of upper-level course work and tasks required for the competitive job market. In the CCC's Principles for Postsecondary Teaching of Writing, the task force argued that effective writing instruction makes connections between writing and technologies (Guiding Principles). NCTE asserts that twenty-first century literacies include a sense of "fluency" with technology (The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies). NCTE and the CCC also advocate for practicing forms of multimodal and digital communication as part of writing instruction. The team was sensitive to the faculty's concerns that some students do not have access to technology, and that non-traditional students, in particular, are uncomfortable using technology. Other faculty members expressed that English is not the right discipline for digital or multimodal work, and others were concerned with technology replacing the role of the teacher. We agreed that technology should supplement instruction, and we also have an understanding concerning the issues of access; however, students have access to computers and other forms of technology at Pellissippi. Moreover, students come to various classes with all kinds of insecurities and gaps in knowledge. The purpose of higher education is to fill the gaps in this knowledge and to create more comfort in working with or in unfamiliar areas. The twenty-first century classroom and workplace of today demands a minimum level of literacy in digital communication, whether it is how to write an email, how to write for different online genres, or how to create effective Power Point presentations. With this in mind, the English faculty needs to improve their own comfort with digital learning and digital rhetoric, and they need to teach this vital component to their students, despite the resistance or concerns that the faculty

expressed. As the faculty noted, writing is a shared practice among all disciplines, and that includes digital environments. English is an ideal venue to learn digital writing and multimodal communication.

The team also recommended that the ENGL 1010 and 1020 faculty members be made aware of their individual final assessment results along with the department's collective results, and we added in this recommendation that the department reconsider and revise their data collection methods. The team felt that faculty members could continue their pedagogical development if they knew where they fell individually in the assessment and could compare their results with departmental averages. This way, an individual faculty member would know in what areas she had been most successful and where she could improve. Thus, the writing program administrator and department dean would be able to provide the English faculty with resources or training in a more individually tailored way, thus ensuring consistency across the curriculum. The second part of this recommendation will be discussed at more length in Focal Area 2, but the team does suggest that a fuller understanding of how students have achieved learning outcomes may be obtained beyond textual analysis of their summative assessments at the end of the semester.

2. Curriculum and Co-Curriculum

The team commends the English Department for removing the communications classes from the department and moving them into the liberal arts' domain. Teaching these courses was extending the department's scope beyond its purview and created inconsistency in the curriculum. We encourage the department to continue to maintain the curriculum's integrity by aiming for consistency in course offerings and learning outcomes.

Additionally, we were impressed with the variety of course offerings in the department. We understand that ENGL 1010 and 1020 are the most prolific courses offered each semester, but we were especially pleased with the variety of British, American, African-American, and other literature courses. Moreover, there's an extensive offering of creative writing courses, from poetry to playwriting to fiction writing, to name a few. The curriculum also offers business and technical writing, as well as media writing offerings, which are crucial for students in the twenty-first century educational and career environments. Students noted that they thought more critically in English classes than for classes in other disciplines. We commend the department for offering such an ambitious creative writing and literary curriculum.

In addition to approving of the curriculum change in which the communications classes were pruned from the course offerings in English and the variety of courses offered, the team was impressed with the way English faculty makes itself available to a student body with diverse needs. Students praised the faculty for holding extensive office hours with morning, afternoon, and evening availability to meet at any time of the day. One student in particular asserted that faculty were extremely understanding about the demands of being a single working mother and student, and said that one professor in the English Department held office hours with this student digitally using Skype, so the student did not have to leave home. The students remarked that professors extended lessons from class during office hours, and they felt that their papers improved because of the time professors spent out of

class commenting on drafts. Students also informed us that the faculty encourages them to publish, particularly in creative presses, such as the literary publication, *Imaginary Gardens*. Thus, faculty is providing hands-on mentorship that is exceptional, and that students greatly appreciate.

The department's involvement in co-curricular activities was another area worthy of praise. The English Department clearly has produced faculty leaders in the college. The self-study reported that "an English Department faculty member has served as the chair of the Common Academic Experience committee" since 2006 and that this committee includes at least one faculty member from the English department (7). The English Department was and is well represented on the events planning committee for the Common Academic Experience. Additionally, the faculty has led various activities related to the Common Academic Experience, including discussion groups and a hike on the Appalachian Trail. Along with the department's commitment to the Common Academic Experience, the faculty has created opportunities for students to develop their creative writing skills and to publish in *Imaginary Gardens*, the college's arts magazine, and also through the Creative Writing Club. The Strawberry Plains campus seemed to be the most active in the Creative Writing Club, and we want to further encourage the department to improve and promote their marketing of these events, so that they can unite the other campuses, as well. The students also spoke fondly of *Imaginary Gardens*, but they seemed less aware of the other creative writing activities. Additionally, the department sponsors the student club, *Gnosis*, and has had numerous speaking engagements at the clubs lecture events. The department should be praised for its involvement in this award-winning club and for its leadership on campus. However, creating extracurricular activities outside of creative writing would also help reinforce or provide opportunities to extend connections to the learning objectives. The English department may consider sponsoring reading groups, developing a lecture series, in which students present their own academic work, and even Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society, as alternative ways to expand their co-curricular activities.

In the self-study, Initiative 2 stated that a potential change in the department included "consider[ing] developing more consistency in the types of essays assigned in both [ENGL 1010 and 1020]" (19). The team affirmed this initiative, recognizing the need to develop consistency, so that students are learning the same skills in each class. In addition to providing consistency, the department should also consider improved teaching for transfer and writing across the curriculum. It is clear that the department prepares students to perform in classes in the English department, as the skills in "ENGL 1010 remain relevant all the way through a sophomore literature course" (Self-Study 7), but this focus on preparing student skills for the English Department neglects the reality that most students in first-year composition pursue other educational paths and disciplines rather than English. During the site visit, the department discussed that they have held workshops for faculty in other disciplines to teach them about effective paragraph construction and writing like a scientist, but this education would be better if included in the first-year composition classroom and available to all students at the same time. In the Executive Summary of the CCCC's *Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*, the CCCC recognizes that writing education gives students experiences writing across and for various contexts and audiences. They add that "[s]ound writing instruction" teaches writing for different genres. ENGL 1020 teaches one genre: the literary analysis. To improve teaching students to write across the curriculum,

faculty should not only provide workshops on writing instruction with faculty in other disciplines; they should also consult with these faculty members to learn more about the kinds of writing they will expect from students and use this information to inform the first-year composition program to provide more effective and real writing across the curriculum education.

Moreover, the team recommended that the department reconsider and revise their data collection methods. The Student Perception Survey is a good start to using the survey, but it does not ask enough questions to yield enough data for program assessment. Additionally, the summative assessment for ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020 focus on one essay produced at the end of the semester, which yields results about only one essay and not the entire semester's curriculum. We suggest an overhaul of the department's data collection methods in order to yield data that can help in the department's efforts to revise the curriculum. Again, we suggest consultation with the CCCC and other disciplinary associations to discern best practices in assessment.

3. Teaching and Learning

The English faculty are extremely dedicated to the teaching and learning processes as proven by their program review in 2008-2009. While the faculty recognized that their service communities demand a variety of learning environments, the audit team suggested that the program investigate and implement some new technologies to benefit both teaching and learning. The English faculty also realized that there is a need to state clearly the student learning outcomes and to make sure students are well aware of their course expectations. The audit team strongly encourages the use of a standard syllabus across multiple sections of a given course to ensure that all students are aware of the academic expectations required for success. The audit team was very impressed with the use of the online Instructor Café in D2L in order ensure that all faculty, both full-time and adjunct, have access to a variety of teaching tools and resources. The English department regularly collects data in order for faculty to see how the department performs collectively in order to determine any improvements that should be made. The audit team recommends that this data also be used to compare each faculty member to the departmental averages in order to look at any individual improvements that should be made. The audit team is also very pleased with the Common Reader implementation both as an English course reinforcement tool but also as an interaction and engagement tool across all PSTCC courses. The audit team encourages the use of the Writing Center however; the team does recommend that the English department facilitate a stronger relationship. The annual retreat of the English department is very beneficial in regards to syllabi revisions, textbook evaluations, and implementation of the ENGL 1030 course; however, the audit team would like to see a more specific mechanism for which students are identified as needing ENGL 1030. The team also appreciates the volunteer opportunities and extra-curricular activities that the English faculty participate in. Lastly, the audit team would like to recommend that the English department work closer with their transfer schools and programs to facilitate an easier transition for their students.

4. Student Learning Assessment

Within the area of student learning assessment, the English Department at PSCC provides several examples of evaluation instruments which measure the success of their program. Pre-and-post tests are given by the English department as a means of assessing and tracking effectiveness of the curriculum. Examples of formal assessment are the ones currently being used in ENGL 1010, ENGL 1020, and the Sophomore Literature Assessment. In addition to these assessments, the College administers a survey, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which is given to students to examine their behaviors and institutional practices. Used primarily as a research tool, this testing instrument's data is used in the college's QEP design and development. Student folders, an informal portfolio based assessment, are used in ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020 composition courses, and they are another evaluation tool used by the English Department. These folders are periodically reviewed by the Dean and contain all of the major student essays that are required in ENGL 1010 and 1020 classes.

Along with student learning assessment, there are indicators that quality improvement processes and outcomes are provided within the English Department. Three initiatives are currently in place which address student learning outcomes. These are the revitalization of the two English Composition courses, ENGL 1010 and 1020, and the emphasis of student engagement within the College's QEP.

5. Quality Assurance

There are several examples that can be indicated as evidence of quality assurance within the English Department at PSCC. A report is generated from the College's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Assessment and Planning. Data provided from this report tracks students' retention rates, as well as grade distribution among individual sections of all of the English courses. Another example of quality assurance is the use of online Master Courses, Instructor Cafes, located in D2L. Providing an invaluable resource for the PSCC English faculty, the Instructor Cafes contain sample syllabi, worksheets, handouts, exams, and other vital materials about curriculum and course design. Professional growth programs are also provided to instructors. Some examples of these are workshops related to student advising, plagiarism, and grading. In addition to these workshops, the English Department's QEP coordinator provides development workshops for full and part-time faculty in the areas of Student Engagement Techniques (SETS), and Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATS). Institutional and departmental policies for hiring faculty and staff are another example of quality assurance within the department. Full-time, non-tenured full-time, full-time promotional candidates, tenured full-time, as well as adjunct faculty members, are evaluated for their performance through the use of classroom observations, annual self-evaluations, student surveys, and the actual promotion-tenure process.

IV. Conclusion

A. Commendations

The English Department received several commendations in the focal areas of student learning assessment and quality assurance. Faculty support of students inside and outside the class, as well as faculty availability and accessibility was highly praised by students. Students commented on how

professors within the English Department went “above and beyond” their expectations, providing accessibility outside of class. Grades provided to students offered feedback, useful comments, and suggestions where they could revise their writings and learn the writing process. Critical thinking skills were utilized in classes, where some students felt that they were “sharpening their thinking skills.” From an approachability stand-point, students made comments relating to how professors are “always willing to help and are very accessible to students.” Several students complimented the English program on their commitment to small classroom size and the English faculty’s dedication to “developing lasting relationships with their students.”

Departmental efforts to collect data and document for program assessment were another area of commendation for the English Department. Evidence of this was seen in the use of student folders and the report received from the Department of Institutional Effectiveness, Assessment and Planning. Student folders from 1010 and 1020 English classes were kept, analyzed, and reviewed for grading policies. The folders, containing all major essays from the two English composition classes, were collected at the end of the semester and were examined by the Dean of the English department for grading practices. Success rates and grade distributions of each individual course and section were also analyzed through the use of a report that is generated by the Department of Institutional Effectiveness, Assessment and Planning.

A third commendation that the English Department received was how leadership mediated classroom conflicts and observations on all five PSCC campuses. It was noted that the department Dean annually observed non-tenured full-time faculty and full-time promotional candidates in the classroom. Tenured faculty were also evaluated annually by the Dean or a peer. Adjunct faculty, on the other hand, were observed during their first six semesters of teaching by the departmental Dean.

B. Affirmations

Several affirmations were made about the English Department within the focal area of student learning assessment. Recognition of Initiative 2, the revitalization of freshman ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020, was addressed as a departmental concern. The development of a student competency checklist was affirmed, along with a focus on consistency with assigned essays in the two English composition classes.

C. Recommendations

Several recommendations in the focal areas of student learning assessment and quality assurance were made. A suggestion was made that ENGL 1010 and 1020 faculty be made aware of their final assessment results, along with the department’s results, in order to reconsider and revise their data collection methods. Currently, the ENGL 1010 final exam is an argument essay. As the data gathering process currently stands, data results are submitted to the department dean and the English faculty. The format for the ENGL 1020 exam involves a “cold” reading from a short story and a summary. Two further suggestions were made in the focal area of quality assurance concerning digital literacy and the use of instructional technology, as well as increased communication with transfer schools and programs. The importance of further preparing students for upper level courses through the use of instructional

technology in the classroom was stressed in the recommendation. Advising practices would be assisted through the use of enhanced correspondence between PSCC and its transfer schools, especially regarding changes related to curriculum, class size, and current degree programs offered.