

## **The Big Question: Curriculum Reform, Assessment and the Survival of the English Major**

**Seri I. Luangphinit**  
*University of Hawai'i at Hilo*

This essay has been one of the hardest professionally to write as it documents some very personal and professional soul-searching that involved myself, many of my colleagues, and the students in our department over the span of four years. When I first presented our initial reform attempts at the 2010 CEA in San Antonio, much of this paper was simply about our new major which emerged as a result of assessing our failing program and negotiating the politics of reforming the English Major. We were proud to have rolled out a new version of the English major that seemed in better standing with the national trend towards student-centered learning. But since then, a number of local and national developments have lent urgency for further reflection and even more drastic changes to the “way we do business.” This essay will lay bare the emotionally challenging and often convoluted process by which one small program in a rural community in the Hawaiian Islands is continually having to re-invent itself at a critical time when there seems to be a cadre of setbacks and pressures, both internal and external, that will inevitably impact the future viability of literary studies as we know it.

I begin with bleak numbers and some background information which will help explain why soul-searching was needed in the first place. From our all-time high of 97 majors in 2001

(representing 3% of the total enrollment), we had by 2008 dropped to 57 (or 2%) even though our overall campus enrollment was up by 23%. Naively thinking this development was due to an “outdated” model of literary studies, the English department decided to replace a literature/writing bifurcation with what was thought to be a more solid “core” in AY 2005-2006:

1. CORE LOWER DIVISION COURSES (12):

- ENG 100/100T/ESL 100/ESL 100T Expository Writing (3)
- ENG 215 Writing for Humanities and Social Sciences (3)
- ENG 251 Major Works of British Literature I (3)
- ENG 252 Major Works of British Literature II (3)

2. CORE UPPER DIVISION COURSES (6):

- ENG 300 Introduction to Literary Studies (3)
- ENG 315 Advanced Composition (3)

3. ONE PRE-1700 CORE COURSE. CHOOSE ONE COURSE FROM THE FOLLOWING (3):

- ENG 301 The Bible as Literature (3)
- ENG 303 Backgrounds to English Studies (3)
- ENG 435 Chaucer (3)
- ENG 437 Renaissance Poetry and Prose (3)
- ENG 438 Milton (3)
- ENG 459 Medieval Literature (3)
- ENG 460 Renaissance Drama (3)
- ENG 461 Shakespeare I (3)
- ENG 462 Shakespeare II (3)

4. ONE POST-1700 CORE COURSE. CHOOSE ONE COURSE FROM THE FOLLOWING (3):

- ENG 351 Survey of American Literature: To the Civil War (3)
- ENG 352 Survey of American Literature: Civil War to the Present (3)
- ENG 355 Women in Modern Literature and Film (3)
- ENG 387 Literature of the Environment (3)
- ENG 423 Post-Colonial Literature(3)

- ENG 430 Pacific Islands Literature (3)
- ENG 440 Restoration and 18th Century Literature (3)
- ENG 442 Romantic Literature (3)
- ENG 445 Victorian Literature (3)
- ENG 464 Modern Literature (3)
- ENG 483 Modern Drama (3)

We simultaneously introduced four areas in the major—Literary Studies; Rhetoric, Composition, and Creative Writing; Cultural Studies; and ESL/TESOL—that required specific sets of prescribed classes. The following were the requirements for just the Literary Studies specialization:

1. ENG 303 (3) BACKGROUNDS TO ENGLISH STUDIES

2. FIVE OF THE FOLLOWING COURSES. FOUR OF THE FIVE COURSES MUST BE 300-400 LEVEL COURSES, AND ALL MUST BE DIFFERENT FROM COURSES TAKEN FOR THE MAJOR CORE REQUIREMENTS. (15)

- ENG 253 (3) World Literature: Classical to 17th Century
- ENG 301 (3) Bible as Literature
- ENG 345 (3) Children and Literature
- ENG 351 (3) Survey of American Literature: To the Civil War
- ENG 352 (3) Survey of American Literature: Civil War to the Present
- ENG 355 (3) Women in Modern Literature and Film
- ENG 423 (3) Post-Colonial Literature
- ENG 435 (3) Chaucer
- ENG 437 (3) Renaissance Poetry and Prose
- ENG 438 (3) Milton
- ENG 440 (3) Restoration and 18th Century Literature
- ENG 442 (3) Romantic Literature
- ENG 445 (3) Victorian Literature
- ENG 459 (3) Medieval Literature
- ENG 460 (3) Renaissance Drama
- ENG 461 (3) Shakespeare I
- ENG 462 (3) Shakespeare II
- ENG 464 (3) Modern Literature
- ENG 475 (3) Theoretical and Practical Criticism

- ENG 483 (3) Modern Drama
- ENG 488 (3) Single Author

### 3. FOUR 300-400 LEVEL ENGLISH COURSES OUTSIDE AREA OF EMPHASIS

Many of these class assignments were based on a series of contentious meetings where faculty argued over how their courses should count in the new major. In embarrassing hindsight, I must admit that my own rationale was fueled by a desire to generate enrollment. Under such circumstances, what emerges is what Alan Shepard labels as the “gumbo model of picking and choosing courses” that faculty think students want or need when in reality it may actually be “symptomatic of our greed for teaching only what we want” (25, 26). Predictably, despite these best of intentions, the number of majors continued to fall, and the fewer majors we had, the less willing administration became to fill vacant positions—four were lost to administrative positions, one to retirement, and another to job termination. Apart from the freezing of tenure-track positions came the push to increase course-caps in our Freshman Composition classes, the one area where we still had huge demand. Remaining majors immediately began to complain of the lack of 300- and 400-level courses (low enrolled upper division courses were automatically cancelled and replaced with English 100). So as upper division courses dwindled, so did the ability of our majors to graduate on time. This led even fewer students to consider us an option. In the meantime, we simply didn't have the resources to cover four discrete specializations. We began overwhelming the Registrar with heaps of graduation waivers for our graduating seniors who could not find classes to satisfy these different areas.

We would have never known the extent of the negative impact of this new major if we had not surveyed in 2007 as many existing majors as we could. Their responses showed us that

our new major was overly prescriptive to the point they lacked adequate numbers of courses to take each semester to fulfill their chosen areas of specialization. Collectively, the 35 surveys reflected the need for more classes per individual student than we had faculty to teach them. Furthermore, when asked what classes s/he still needed or wanted to take, one Junior's comments suggested a certain level of frustration and confusion: "there is a lot more and they are mostly upper division and I really don't want to think about it. At all [sic]." Many also expressed a desire for more freedom and a wider range of topics than could be offered even under this current major.

As one of the members involved in the drafting of the 2005-2006 major, I will admit that the demands of faculty to teach the classes we develop are not unnatural. This is what we are trained to do—we specialize in certain areas and we go forth to cultivate similar interests in students. But such are the limitations of our own education, which pretty much encapsulate what John Tagg sees as the dilemma underpinning the workings of an "Instruction Paradigm College." Tagg argues that "Because separate departments, each competing for its own share of enrollment, produce the curriculum, we should expect them to produce a basket of classes that have no very clear relation to one another, that are selected more for their difference than for their similarity" (25). The same can be said of individual faculty and sub-disciplines within English—we compete with each other for student interest and we thus develop courses in conjunction with what we each think students need or want; we rarely conceive the curriculum as an entire unit. Unfortunately, a summation of individual desires on the part of faculty in terms of what they want to teach neither lends itself to a meaningful source of study for students nor is likely to involve a real cognizance of student learning, but rather what Graff calls "trickle-down

obfuscation” and “Coursecentrism” (“Why Assessment” 157). Such a system quickly manifests itself in what he calls the “Great-Teacher Fetish,” which makes for a “recipe for bad education” (“Assessment Changes Everything” 3). In other words, anarchy.

In many ways, anarchy really is the fundamental premise of the Instruction Paradigm, observations which trace back to the era of Paulo Freire, who once noted that the hierarchical model (or “banking system”) of education constructs a passive role for students, and the “more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adopt the world as it is and the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (54). In such contexts, students internalize and normalize the fragmentation, as well as assume that “knowledge is bestowed” unto them (Freire 53). Over time, that dependency evolved into the packaging of education as a series of required courses; in fact, as Tagg points out, the focus on student credit hours and the management of enrollment in terms of fixed disciplinary offerings “had become the end, not the definition, of higher education” (16-17). Tagg argues that the resulting mission of most universities oversimplifies the taking of classes (by students) in purely credit hour terms and solidifies the instruction-centered model, or the one-way “transmission of information from teachers to students” (19). Unfortunately, “In such a system, since the basic process model is fixed, it is in the self-interest of the participants to deflect blame” (Tagg 20), the face of which is either “blame the student” or “blame the teacher” when performance is less than acceptable (21). Thus, while the standardization of a coercive curriculum is assumed to ensure a form of stability, the irony is that such a model encourages dysfunction, confusion, and incoherence. In our case, the implied dependency we were foisting on students only led them elsewhere, while the faculty were left thinking such drops in enrollment could be explained by students “wanting an easier

major” or the fact we have older faculty who haven’t published and therefore couldn’t possibly teach. Yes, we were pointing fingers at students and each other. Meetings took on the tone of a war zone.

All grumbling aside, UHH’s English Department had no choice but to quickly reform our major for more practical reasons. In AY 2008-2009, we turned to curriculum assessment to help chart a way out of this conundrum. A simple course matrix was the first to alert us to major inconsistencies in our sequencing:

Areas of Emphases	200 Level	300 Level	400 Level
British Literature	251 Survey I 252 Survey II		435 Chaucer 437 Renaissance Poetry 438 Milton 440 Restoration 442 Romantics 459 Medieval Literature 460 Renaissance Drama 461 Shakespeare I 462 Shakespeare II
American Literature	275 Lit of the Earth	351 Survey I 352 Survey II	
Film/Pop Culture		345 Children & Lit 355 Women in Modern Lit & Film	
Folklore		301 Bible as Literature	
Ethnic/Cultural Studies		323 Lit of Hawai‘i 344 Children & Lang 345 Children & Lit 355 Women in Modern Lit & Film	423 Post-Colonial Lit 430 Pacific Islands Lit 480 Women & Rhetoric

Our department quickly identified the clustering of British literature at the 400-level and the lack of transition between those and the lower level surveys. We realized that we did not offer any real preparation for our mid-range film, cultural studies, folklore, and American literature courses, which occupied a symbolic space of “lesser” difficulty if not importance. These gaps (coupled with direct student feedback) motivated the Department to narrow requirements to only five courses—English 300 Intro to Literary Studies (which became the sole prerequisite for most of our upper division courses), two American Surveys, and two British Surveys (which were recalibrated to occupy slots at the 300-level). In AY 2008-2009, we also introduced 16 new 200-level genre and student-interest based studies (i.e. The Short Story and Novel, Hawai‘i on Screen, Intro to Race and Gender Studies, Popular Culture, and Folklore) per their earlier feedback to ease the transition out of English 100 Freshman Composition. In AY 2009-2010, we added 11 courses in American Literature, Media (including Pacific Film), Major World Literary Movements, Folklore and Pedagogical Studies in Literature and Composition at the 300- and 400-level to provide balance to what many students (and our outside reviewer) called a British-centered major. Students and teachers have also been simultaneously working together on shared learning goals and rubrics for critical thinking, information literacy, communication (argument), integrated learning, intercultural knowledge, and theoretical reasoning that link all of our courses together, from English 100 Freshman Composition to our 4th-year upper division classes. These learning outcomes are also intended to dovetail with the new General Education program, slated to begin in the Fall of 2012. In anticipation, our majors have helped us to redesign our mission statement, our website and the assessment rubrics that will soon grace their online creation.

From this point, we were ready to engage in more direct assessment, and to my colleagues here and elsewhere who remain skeptical of the “A-word,” I will argue that the act of getting together around a table and collectively reading student work served as our first step in alleviating the aforementioned disorder and dissonance of our program by initiating “collegial agreement” among faculty (Graff, “Why Assessment” 161). In other words, the empowering mandate of assessment is that it can lead to “a curriculum coordinated and connected enough to be transparent, accessible, and self-reinforcing” (Graff, “Why Assessment” 161). In fact, if done with the intent of identifying how well our students perform and what we can collectively do to improve their performance, meaningful assessment actually produces a positive environment conducive to self-actualized learning on the part of teachers. For example, our summer 2010 assessment project that looked at sample papers from our new 200-level literature courses, English 300 and an upper-division literature course revealed strong performances in critical thinking. I was pleased to report that well over 80% of our students were meeting minimal competency with at least 40% at any given time demonstrating strong or excellent writing (Luangphinit 6). The same report also identified an area needing attention: the underperforming papers were consistently produced by non-majors who were attracted to the special topics classes (i.e. English 475 Queer Literature and Film), meaning we were facing bifurcated student populations—those who were well trained in literary studies and written analysis and those who were not. More importantly, per one of our participants, Kirsten Mollegaard, the exercise proved fruitful in deconstructing certain emotional barriers that often emerged in pedagogical discussions: “I found it exciting (both personally and professionally) to see how my colleagues assign papers and how the students respond to the assignment. When do we ever have these

types of conversations? Well, never-except when we grade WPEs [Writing Placement Exams] together or meet informally. The assessment forum is very important in keeping us all on track and to remind us that we are not the Red Queens of the classroom. We are actually working to achieve the same goals, and we co-exist with other professionals” (cited by Luangphinit 6). Mollegaard goes on to state “Collectively these types of professional get-togethers help us focus on our mission. This is much better than meeting informally to chat. It is way better than the formal department meetings which at times feel like an episode of *Lost* with everyone trying to oust someone else or drill a hole in the last lifeboat” (cited by Luangphinit 6).

This crisis taught us that English was a “dispensable” major regardless of whatever position papers might be released by the AAC&U on the need for the Humanities in Higher Education. Despite all of our recent efforts, we are still not in the clear. Locally, our school adopted a sudden push towards STEM that places pressure on our Department to abandon literature and focus on service-learning courses, such as Freshman Composition and English 225 Writing in the Sciences. Such moves are coming on the heels of pre-built freshmen schedules and new performance-based funding initiatives for the University of Hawai‘i system that peg allotted dollar amounts to set numbers of STEM, PELL and Native Hawaiian graduates per each campus. Beginning in March of this past year, local television station KITV has been busy promoting such feature articles as “Push for Science And Math Education Can Mean Greater Rewards for Students” (23 March 2011) and Kamen’s “Key to Keeping Tech Edge? Teach Science” (13 May 2011). These were likely prompted by President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address, where he renewed his commitment for his “Education to Innovate” platform that specifically targets STEM as a means of helping to rebuild America’s economic edge. Further

complicating the discussion are debates about the general financial worthiness of higher education in which English is depicted as part of curmudgeonly, antiquated agenda that is more about positioning the professor as academic authority than it is about giving students anything worth their while. Specifically, I cite the April 13, 2011 edition of *The Economist*, which features “High Education: The latest bubble?” In it, the author quotes the following lines from William Deresiewicz’s review in *Slate* of Marjorie Garber’s *The Use and Abuse of Literature*: “once you pick your way through its heaps of critical detritus—its mildewed commonplaces and shot-sprung arguments, its half-chewed digressions and butt ends of academic cliché—you uncover underneath it all a single dubious and self-serving claim: that the central actor in the literary process is, what do you know, the English professor” (par. 13). But it is not so much the actual critique of Garber’s book that intrigues Deresiewicz but what such academic writing represents: “And Ms. Garber, remember, is a leading professor at America’s leading university, or one of them anyway. Imagine what the average exercise in literary theory is like from a professor at a second- or third-division school. It is hard to regard this sort of stuff as a contribution to either knowledge or civilization” (par. 14). This dismissal of what many English faculty do in terms of publishing and teaching comes sandwiched between arguments that “tuition costs are too high, debt loads are too onerous, and there is mounting evidence that the rewards are over-rated” (par. 3) and that even applications to more meaningful degrees such as law are dropping because “the education bubble is already beginning to burst” (par. 18). The message is clear—literary studies is not just dispensable, but we are also seen by some as a complete waste of time and money. And anarchy on our part only exacerbates the pressures we find ourselves under because it doesn’t allow us to focus on the real cause of the dissonance within our program.

Let me now take a dramatic turn and admit that curriculum reform and assessment cannot be the panacea for all that is currently amiss in higher education. Sadly, even with our new major and a revamping of English 300 Intro to the Major, which includes a common syllabus for teachers who address both “applied” theory and pedagogical practice (such as writing a secondary-level lesson plan vis-à-vis Common Core Standards), our numbers are still woefully low: 57 in 2008, 57 in 2009, and 66 in 2010. Our students are also still clamoring for more change. This past Spring of 2011, students in English 300 surveyed their professors and their peers and asked if they thought the requirements for American Literature and British Literature should be dropped for a single year-long course emphasizing a global approach to literary studies that could include more film and other non-traditional forms of narrative. Students reported feeling very saddened by the faculty response affirming the need for these areas. And this is where I, personally, am very conflicted. I know that many of our students go on to become primary or secondary English teachers in the public school system (of the 17 in English 300 last academic year, 9 indicated an intent to enroll in the Education Department’s certificate program), where they will need a strong background in both of these areas given Common Core emphases in certain literatures. Many senior faculty members also feel that canonical literature must remain a fundamental part of the English major, views not unlike what were extolled by Harold Bloom back in 1994. Similar sentiments underpin the MLA’s 2009 *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature*: “The role of literature needs to be emphasized. Sustained, deep engagements with literary works and literary language open perceptions of structure, texture, and the layering of meaning that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills” (3). Granted, the MLA supports

the study of a variety of texts; however, the classifications of programmatic areas they include in the report rely on very conventional categories: English language and literature, general, Comparative literature, English literature (British and Commonwealth); American literature (United States), English Composition; Technical and business writing; Creative Writing; English language and literature/letters, other; and Speech and rhetorical studies (25). Within the academy itself are those who, as Kevin Brown points out, feel that literary studies should not be “selling out to the crass demands of the marketplace” (par. 38).

It is hard to ignore the emerging rhetoric of “universality” in terms of what we English teachers should teach. On the national level, organizations like the AAC&U are pushing for trans-disciplinary approaches to curriculum; in other words, rather than a series of discrete courses, programs should look to “cross-disciplinary topics” and encourage students to “engage big questions” (Schneider 3). Helen Vendler better articulates this perspective in her “valuation” of the humanities: “The arts bring into play historical and philosophical questions without implying the prevalence of a single system or of universal solutions” (8). In its 2009 *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature*, the MLA itself took the initiative to incorporate many of the trans-disciplinary skills advocated in the AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP). The MLA goes so far as to argue that the study of literature is the key to “understanding narratives that lead to the discovery of other cultures” (2); therefore, arguably, “Students trained in one national or community-based culture acquire knowledge and abilities in reading, writing, and communication that extend to other languages” (9).

But this intra-canonical perspective is not necessarily the bedrock of our conventional teaching of literature. Are we teaching the iambic pentameter as a form of effective communication? When we ask students to write papers on *The Canterbury Tales* or *Native Son*, are we asking them to develop argumentative skills that are also applicable to more mundane forms of writing, such as the professional email or the cover letter? And when we provoke analysis of characters, do we help students to breakdown similar types of people and moral dilemmas that are all around them in the real world? This brings me back to a fundamental point that a student raised in his paper in English 300 two years ago when the class was asked to evaluate our new major: “I can acquire the same research skills looking into the Dallas Cowboys in a sports literature class [as I would] researching Christopher Marlowe in a Brit[ish literature] class” (Holzman-Escareno 6). This is the same premise informing Gerald Graff’s teaching of Vanna White and pop cultural “texts” as a means of generating advanced approaches to critical analysis. And if this is the case, then perhaps even we at UHH have not gone far enough in rethinking what a study of English can be, because as Graff reminds us, “it is not the text we assign that determines the educational value of reading and studying it but the questions we bring to the text or the ways we think and talk about it [ . . . ] therefore all readings are equally valid” (“Why We Read” 71-72). All of this implies a tremendous paradigm shift away from content-based knowledge, that can be precisely measured by instruments such as the Major Field Test or the GRE Subject Exam, to a skills-based curriculum that has to demonstrate applicability *between* and *outside* of literature classrooms, an applicability that will have to be overtly and clearly worded into syllabi and assignments for it to become an actual part of the curriculum. Such a shift represents a diametric opposition to the way I and many of my colleagues were

taught how to teach and have been teaching for many years; it is a shift that students themselves seem to crave: “Do students of an English Program need a curriculum that focuses on content, and on canons—the agreed upon classics for the last however many decades? Or can students be taught a more flexible curriculum that allows them to pick and choose their path[s], as long as they are learning the universal skills that every English Major needs to have developed throughout the course of earning a degree? [ . . . ] I would like to argue for universal skills, freedom of choice [ . . . ]” (Suganuma 7).

My unease, though, cannot ignore the results of our most recent direct assessment of English Majors for GE Skill 6, Human Interaction and Cultural Diversity. A summer 2011 reading by members of UHH’s Assessment Committee of four “film guides” for English 469 The History of Bollywood—which was assigned as final group presentations to the public—identified severe problems with expressing a “sense of humanity” and a “sense of others” per our General Education rubrics. All four film guides presented information that was clearly biased and reflected exoticized if not denigrating views of India’s history and culture. For example, the pamphlet for *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* made use of Franz Fanon to render a reading of the Mahatma Gandhi’s Satyagraha Movement as the “native culture’s attempt to establish a national identity as a return to the glorious past”; it also chose to highlight the film’s “weakness” on ignoring the “real” slums of Mumbai. Similarly, the flyer for *Monsoon Wedding* simplistically focused on the sole issue of arranged marriages. That one of our upper division courses, which was populated by many of our best majors, showed weaknesses in what are core General Education learning outcomes is problematic, because it means our fourth-year students have not learned how to critically and analytically engage other cultures much less their own western

assumptions despite having been through a cadre of national canons and theories (including post-colonial). Furthermore, despite having learned to undertake in-depth research on literary authors and major works, students in English 469 resorted to an almost indiscriminant search of the internet for information. Upon questioning after final exams, these students could cite procedures for locating peer-reviewed articles on Shakespeare or Sherman Alexie, but none could identify reputable sources of information on South-Asian social and political issues as addressed by the films in the class, despite having been given many professional news articles and position papers by UNESCO and other such agencies in class. This indicates that even information literacy may be discipline-bound, because some of the students in English 469 produced some of the better work for our assessment of critical thinking the summer prior; our results suggest the MLA's assumption that literary studies is transferable may be overstated.

In any event, the rapidly changing landscape and the move to performance-based funding has certainly impacted us because we, like any other department, will now have to ask: how do we contribute to the graduation rates for target populations? Our new mission statement under the UH Hilo Strategic Plan for 2011-2015 also suggests a change in direction: "The purpose of our university *'ohana/family* is to challenge students to reach their highest level of academic achievement by inspiring learning, discovery and creativity inside and outside the classroom. Our *kuleana/responsibility* is to improve the quality of life of the people of Hawai'i, the Pacific region and the world." Measuring the success of our department will hinge on how well we do in upholding these new initiatives which emphasize community engagement and an awareness of indigeneity. Resisting pressures to slip into service-learning will also depend upon increasing the numbers of majors when state and national trends curve towards the sciences. So for us, it may

not be enough to revamp the major in the manner documented by Jennifer Summit at Stanford where the revised curriculum focuses on teaching historical literacy “as a way to excite students’ curiosity about the past, as neither an antiquarian object nor a monument to be revered [ . . . ] but as the building material of the present, subject to rearrangement, displacement, loss and recovery” (147). Instead, we have to start addressing our non-teaching responsibilities as posed by Kevin Brown at Lee University:

Plaintive cry after plaintive cry goes up from students asking what can they do now that they have ignored the practical routes and pursued a degree in English. We answer these questions from parents who tour the campus with their sons and daughters; we address them when we tell a student in a lower-division course that he or she has real talent in analysis and writing; we assuage fears when our advisees or students in our classes stop by our offices in moments of fear, especially as graduation draws near; and we face the fury of graduates who have returned after a year or two after they have left, only to end up working in a job they could have gotten without the degree at all. (par 6)

If tracking alumni and their success in finding gainful employment is not enough of a burden on English Departments, then the new Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile will add pressure for us to demonstrate (measure) how well a student: (1) Defines and explains the boundaries, divisions, styles and practices of the field; (2) Defines and properly uses the principal terms in the field, both historical and contemporaneous; (3) Demonstrates fluency in the use of tools, technologies and methods in the field; (4) Evaluates, clarifies and frames a complex question or challenge using perspectives and scholarship from the student’s major field

and at least one other; (5) Constructs a project related to a familiar but complex problem in the field of study by assembling, arranging and reformulating ideas, concepts, designs or techniques; and (6) Constructs a summative project, paper, or practice-based performance that draws on current research, scholarship and/or techniques in the field” (Lumina Foundation 18). The fact that the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was given a grant to run a pilot of the DQP in terms of setting possible accreditation standards means all of this is now at our front doorstep (“\$1.5 Million Grant”).

The push for STEM, the need for institutional alignment, national moves towards common standards, the call for yardsticks measuring student success, and even the applicability of English as a course of study in the “real world” all impact the viability of programs such as English. According to *The Daily Collegian*, the student newspaper of Penn State, the English Department is having to cut upper division courses due to a cut in staffing (Ingeno par. 3). Former Bemiji State University Assistant Professor of English, Susan Cook, blogs “six weeks into my tenure-track position [ . . . ] I was advised by senior faculty members to go back on the job market” (par. 1); such advice came in the wake of a “recalibration,” or , “In practical terms [ . . . ] the loss of 35 faculty positions, 32 graduate assistant positions (half of the current positions), 10.75 staff positions, and the men’s track program” (par 1). It would appear schools large and small will increasingly feel compression of the liberal arts and humanities disciplines. To say that curriculum reform and assessment-based decision-making will be the salvation of our discipline would be misleading and such efforts may not necessarily save departments at schools that seem to be hell-bent on changing the way we do business in higher education. But such tools can make the fight a much more transparent process if it should come down to the abolition of

certain fields and/or retrenchment at a time when budgeting decisions are being used to hold departments accountable:

Units and department must [ . . . ] describe how new budget allocations and resources will achieve strategic themes, which is ultimately how they will achieve the [institution's] mission, values, and vision. Even specific processes that involve budgets, such as hiring a staff person or sending faculty to a conference, must be filtered through strategic themes. When anyone requests such specific funding, the person is asked to describe how the funds will support achievement of the strategic themes. (Cordero del Noriega 45-46)

In the face of such demands, departments like English do have the opportunity to present their data and their arguments given the “visibility” mandate inherent within accreditation processes in which “The burden is on the local faculty, administration, students, and staff to present a clear, articulate, fair and accurate picture” (Gray 56) of the relative health and worthiness of programs and degrees.

Needless to say, these times favor evidence-based decision-making. As Marilee Bresciani points out:

as more institutions engage in transparent outcomes-based assessment program review and more programs gather increasing amounts of information about what works and what doesn't, faculty and administrators can expect to have data-driven values discussions about what should be improved and what is “good enough.”

While it may seem a frightening practice, it is better to have values conversations informed by data gathered and analyzed by faculty and administrators themselves,

rather than uninformed opinions, politically motivated opinions, or opinions formed by meaningless indicators. (53)

Whether we go the route of the AAC&U and Stanford and “ask the big questions” or chose the path of Lee University and evaluate post-baccalaureate employment rates and/or continued pursuits of higher education, all of these directives need to be substantiated by hard evidence proving the efficacy of our claims for success. It is not enough to simply theorize on the why of our English Major but to demonstrate that our major does for students what we say it can do. Hard numbers are what most administrators and the public can understand and will demand.

For myself and my fellow teachers at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, we have moved beyond simple curriculum reform and are now engaged in one of the most comprehensive assessment of student writing in our history. We issued a series of surveys to local high school seniors and all freshman entering into freshman composition for AY 2009-2010 and will next apply those findings to a direct assessment of student papers from AY 2008-2009 (176 collected) and for AY 2010-2011 (to be collected) in order to evaluate the results of increased course caps and the elimination of our writing placement exam. These readings will include participation from our colleagues at our local high schools and feeder community colleges to development alignment of writing expectations. Upon this base, we will broaden our tracking of our majors’ writing skills, namely Effective Communication, Critical Thinking, Information Literacy and Human Interaction/Cultural Diversity as mandated by our new General Education Program. Our department will also be meeting with students this coming year to re-evaluate and possibly revamp yet again our own program’s mission statement and the core curriculum which upholds it vis-à-vis the new institutional vision and mandate that was ratified in June of this year. The

newly reconstituted Literature and Writing Club will start an aggressive peer-inspired campaign to promote the English Major. Many of the faculty members will be contacting associates in the private sectors to start developing internships for students in private primary schools, legal offices, public relations firms, and media/web design companies. All of this activity will be setting the stage for one of our most critical program reviews, slated for AY 2012-2013. The “big” question remains, is it enough? Only time will tell.

### Works Cited

- “\$1.5 Million Grant from Lumina Foundation for WASC.” *WASC.org*. 18 May 2011. Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Web. 16 April 2012.
- Bresciani, Marilee J. *Outcomes-Based Academic and Co-Curricular Program Review*. Sterling: Stylus, 2006.
- Brown, Kevin. “What Can they Do with an English Major? Showing Students the Breadth of the Discipline through the Introductory Course to the Discipline and Advising.” *The CEA Forum* 38.2 (2009). CEA, 2009. Web. 11 July 2011.
- Cook, Susan. “‘Recalibration’ in Minnesota.” *Remaking the University*. N.p., 3 May 2011. Web. 18 July 2011.
- Cordero del Noriega, Diane. “Institutional Vision, Values, and Mission: Foundational Filters for Inquiry.” *Taking Ownership of Accreditation: Assessment Processes that Promote Institutional Improvement and Faculty Engagement*. Ed. Amy Driscoll and Diane Cordero del Noriega. Sterling: Stylus, 2006. 37-51. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1995. Print.
- Graff, Gerald. “Assessment Changes Everything.” *MLA Newsletter* (2008): 3-4. Print.

---. "Why How We Read Trumps What We Read." *Profession* (2009): 66-74. Print.

---. "Why Assessment?" *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture*. 10.1 (2009): 153-165. Print.

Gray, Peter. "The Roots of Assessment: Tensions, Solutions, and Research Directions." *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*. Ed. Trudy Banta et al. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002. 49-66. Print.

"Higher Education: The latest bubble?" *The Economist*. 13 April 2011. Web. 21 July 2011.

Holzman-Escareno, Anthony. "The Evolution of a Major." 2010. TS.

Ingeno, Lauren. "English department sees cuts, changes." *The Collegian*. Penn State University, 1 April 2011. Web. 18 July 2011.

Kamen, Dean. "Key to Keeping Tech Edge? Teach Science." *KITV.com*. 13 May 2011. Web. July 21, 2011.

Luangphinit, Seri. Annual Report for AY 2009-2010. Memo to English dept. faculty, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, Hilo, Hawai'i. 31 July 2010.

Lumina Foundation. *The Degree Qualifications Profile*. Indianapolis: Lumina Foundation for Education, 2011.

"Push for Science And Math Education Can Mean Greater Rewards For Students." *KITV.com*. 23 March 2011. Web. 21 July 2011.

*Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature*. Modern Language Association. MLA, Feb. 2009. Web. 14 July 2011.

Schneider, Carol Geary. "Real Reform, Faux Reform: Facing the Cost of the 'Thoughtput' Follies." *Liberal Education* 96.1 (2010): 2-3. Print.

Shepard, Alan. "Gumbo? On the Logic of Undergraduate Curricula in English Studies." *ADE*

*Bulletin* 133 (Winter 2003): 25-28. Print.

Suganuma, Lā'ie. "The Debate between Content and Universal Skills." 2010. TS.

Summit, Jennifer. "Literary History and the Curriculum: How, What, and Why." *Profession*

(2010): 141-50. Print.

Tagg, John. *The Learning Paradigm College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. Print.

Vendler, Helen. "The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar: Centering Humanistic Study on the

Arts." *Liberal Education* 96.1 (2010): 6-13. Print.