Report from the Curriculum Working Group  
Spring 2014 (final version, post-4/25 dept. meeting and final CWG de-briefing)

At the beginning of the spring 2014 semester, the Curriculum Working Group (April Bernard, Barbara Black [chair], Kate Greenspan, Michael Marx, Susannah Mintz, and Martha Wiseman) began its work. Our charge was to review the English major. We met eight times. Admittedly our Friday afternoon meeting time—the only time available to us all—made our meetings vulnerable to department and faculty meetings as well as conference travel. But we feel we have made considerable progress.

Our deliberations began by studying and discussing a very helpful and detailed report from the standing Curriculum Committee, chaired by Michael Marx. This report will be attached to the CWG report; it includes past department-meeting discussions on the curriculum, information on the English major at other colleges (peers and aspirants), helpful guiding questions (such as who are we? what does it mean to be an English major? what do we want our students to know?), and so on.

After digesting this report, we independently drafted answers to two questions: What do you see as the top five problems with the English major curriculum? And what is your “dream vision” of the English major? The first question was, of course, a useful diagnostic exercise; the second allowed each of us to free our minds to think ambitiously and anew about what and who we might wish to “be” (as a department, as a major). Combined, these two questions required us to propose solutions to what we construed as problems.

We then compared our respective lists of problems, and here are the most pronounced continuities among our lists:

1.) missing developmental arc to the major (particularly that students get to the 300 level too quickly).

2.) a strange middle to the major, variously called “soft,” “malnourished” (just too brief), or “overly nuanced” (the 228 vs. 229 distinction)—this middle weakens the “arc” or shape of the major.

3.) student ignorance of literary history.**

4.) the place of creative writing in the major. We felt that writing courses should count toward the major. But there is another problem here, as some of us see it. The genre-specific and level-specific sequencing of writing courses—which makes good pedagogical sense—can have the complicating effect of underscoring “tracks” in the major. Students, indeed, routinely talk of themselves in one track or another. The result of this, while beneficial for creative writing students, is that it does not provide half or more of our majors with comparable sustained interest in and training in their writing; they also do not reap the benefits of smaller courses, and neither do the faculty who teach them.

5.) EN 110 is asked to do too much.
We then used our thought experiments to generate our discussions that followed. In the end, we concluded that the shape of our major is stronger than we might have initially thought, that some targeted changes (as opposed to wholesale change for the sake of change) may effect great improvement, and that both conceptualizing and communicating (both to ourselves and to our students) the nature of our shared enterprise is often where we most need improvement.

Here, then, is a schema for the “revised” English major (total: 11 courses):

EN 110—we recommend keeping this gateway course to the major, but we are concerned that it has been an “overburdened” or “overachieving” course, asked to do too much.

The goals of this course will be close reading, writing in the major (which includes developing library/research skills necessary for the major), introduction to literary theory, building a “technical” language, and equipping students with guiding, generative questions central to the field of English today. Here our students learn how to question.

Extensive genre coverage and historical coverage will not be expected in this course.

We recommend a common literary term handbook, or an online source featured on our website, to make of this course a more “community-based” endeavor. This source—paper or virtual—will be a known resource to students and faculty in all courses throughout the majors’ work in our department.

EN 110 will NOT satisfy the college-wide writing requirement. Rather, all our majors will first take EN 105. EN 110 will then function as our writing-in-the-major course.

THE 200 LEVEL—we recommend discontinuing the two rubrics of “Forms of Language and Literature” and “Language and Literature in Context,” though the courses currently being offered under those rubrics would continue to be offered. Majors will take FOUR (4) 200-level courses:

--Part 1: TWO (2) of the following: EN 211, 213, 215, 217, 219.

Faculty will agree to teach these courses with an eye toward the historical development of the genre, offering a perspective that takes literary influences across historical periods into account. We recognize that many teaching the genre courses already teach them in precisely this way; simply, we think it’s a smart pedagogical strategy and wish to standardize it. These genre courses will continue to serve as prereqs for writing/workshop courses.

--Part 2: TWO (2) additional 200-level courses that students choose, based on faculty offerings. These 200-level courses could include another genre course, an “introductory” course to a literary period or tradition, a “topics” course, or an intro to writing course in a genre of interest (EN 280, 281, 282). These are all courses we currently offer; however, there are three new 200-
level courses that the CWG strongly recommends we develop: a multi-genre writing course; EN 205, along the lines of the current *How to Write a Sentence*—an appealing course for both majors and non-majors who are interested in honing their skills as analytical writers; and an introduction to literary theory.

The appeal of this more robust 200-level requirement is three-fold: It keeps students longer at the 200 level, allowing them time to develop as readers and writers; Part 2 of the 200-level coursework provides some desirable flexibility, both to students and faculty alike, as a counter to the more rigidly defined Part 1 of the 200 level; and it provides a home for writing courses to count for the major.

THESE FIVE INTRO AND INTERMEDIATE COURSES MUST BE COMPLETED BEFORE STUDENTS ADVANCE.

**THE 300 LEVEL**—FIVE courses, two of which can be writing workshops. Thus, at both the 200 level and the 300 level, writing courses are a recognized part of the English major.

Every semester, a few of our 300 levels will be enhanced courses, capped at 15, where students work on a more ambitious paper (as measured by length or scope, or the integration of research and/or theory). In these courses the CW workshop model is imported so that students can focus on being apprentices to a craft, learning to write like critics. Each student will take at least ONE of these. The appeal of these to faculty will be the lower enrollment.

**Over the course of the major, students will take ONE early period/pre-1700, ONE middle period/1700-1900, and ONE late period/post-1900. These can be at either the 200 or 300 level. (The loss of the three “period” requirements a few years ago depleted the major’s commitment to literary historical breadth and variety.)**

**THE CAPSTONE**—ONE course. The CWG believes in the enormous benefits to having all our majors write capstone projects. We also think there is great appeal and power to seniors-only course experiences for our students. Capstones are distinguished by a more visible expectation of maturity and a commitment to a shared enterprise.

We do feel, however, that there are too many capstone options and recommend eliminating the Senior Project.

We also spent considerable time discussing the vexing matter of student preparedness for senior seminars—preparedness in two senses: Are students prepared to write a work of this type and length? Are they prepared to conduct advanced work in the particular area or topic of the seminar? While we are not unanimous on this score, we seem to have reached a majority position: The capstone should offer the student a new experience in a particularly challenging kind of work and will need to deliver some on-the-spot instruction and guidance.
HONORS—There have been some bumps in the road regarding honors, and so we recommend some procedural modifications.

Honors will be awarded to those senior capstones that receive “A” or “A+” written by students with the requisite GPA in the English major. Works of distinction (written by students who do not have the necessary GPA; these works are bound for the department library in PMH 313) will also need to earn an “A” or “A+.” All students will write works of the same length (25 pages) in their capstones; and they will not declare their intention to graduate with honors in English. Rather, the faculty teaching the capstones will decide, on the basis of major GPA and the merit of the work being produced, if they wish to recommend the student for honors (or the work for distinction). At that point, the student will be informed of the nomination; a “defense” or meeting with the student, the capstone faculty member, and a second reader will be scheduled. That second reader—per current practice—will serve as the “eyes of the department” and will be selected as second readers are currently selected—i.e. by the chair, with any useful guidance from the capstone faculty member and with the wider view of workload distribution issues in mind.

The only procedural change we recommend to honors in a thesis is that this work, too, must earn an “A” or “A+” to receive honors. The required GPA is still in place; the selection of the second reader proceeds per current practice.

Thus, the English major comprises ELEVEN (11) courses. The CWG recommends that ONE (1) of those courses could come from an approved list of courses from across the college that could count toward the English major. The department’s Curriculum Committee would determine that list of approved courses.

Additional recommendations (most of these aim to strengthen communication among us as well as between us and our students about who we are and what an English major is, since many of us felt that, although our current curriculum does have a shape and a logic to it, we are inadequately communicating and enacting that conception):

--purge old courses from the catalog that have not been taught in five years.

--eliminate the “enhanced course options” except for W (which would be used for upper-level seminars only).

--continue to communicate message about 110 and its demographic as well as its purpose within the major.

--map out course offerings for the year, as opposed to the semester. Advertise four (perhaps two) years of senior seminars (EN 375s) in advance.
--the regular teaching load of NTT faculty should be only one 300-level course a year. And their courses are to be determined after tenured and tenure-track faculty have been assigned their courses.

--hold annual group advising meeting for English majors.

--help us do a better job in our capacity as advisors. In the department meeting that precedes advising week each semester, devote time to an advising discussion.

--during registration, advertise courses from other departments that might be of interest to our majors.

--recommend to the Registrar that they have a common place on-line on their site where department Prospectuses are available.

--provide time for an annual discussion of what we wish to teach.

--encourage students to begin their 300-level courses in their junior year (and the new schema will probably normalize this).

--include on departmental website possible “paths” through the major.

--Senior Seminars should not count for the Early Period requirement.

--permit students to take two capstone experiences, if there is room after those who need ONE have registered first (though we believe this is current practice, we wish to make it more visible—to faculty and to students—as an option).

**Possible changes that were attractive to some CWG members:**

--while the CWG unanimously supported increasing the number of courses required for the major, a substantial number of us wished to aim for 12, even though we went for the more realistic number of 11 here.

--requiring a poetry course, either EN 213 or another designated 200- or 300-level poetry course at some point during the student’s coursework.

--on the matter of how best to teach literary theory, the CWG was divided. We discussed how most effectively to engage students in the questions and issues that are central to and animate the field of English today. Some felt that offering a mandatory theory course is the best way to teach literary theory. Others believed that a separate theory course is not the most effective way to build student interest in and facility with theory but, rather, that making theory more visible in our courses—in Part 2 of the 200 level but particularly at the 300 level—is the preferable pedagogical approach here.
--several of us wished to dispense with period distribution requirements altogether.

--a junior year essay.

--a portfolio of work.

--a senior year lecture series. Students are required to attend a certain number of lectures, and write reflection pieces on them. These pieces could be turned into advisors or to the Associate Chair.

**What we mean by literary history… the CWG discussed three ways of defining this “thing” that we believe our students are currently lacking: 1) some familiarity with the wide sweep of literary history—that is, what comes before and what comes after…or how, say, NeoClassicism gives way to Romanticism (this is the “grand master narrative” typically delivered via a survey course or course sequence); 2) study in (a course in) a particular literary-historical period—for example, a course on 17th-century poetry; 3) an awareness of the interplay between literature (text) and history (context).

***The department discussed this report at its 4/25 meeting, and there seemed to be general support for the CWG’s findings and recommendations. The CWG noted strong endorsement for two additional changes: a required 213 and a mandatory literary survey course at the 200 level.