Motlow State Community College English Program Auditor Report

Introduction

On Friday, 28 March 2014, a committee chaired by Chattanooga State Community College English Professor Brian Hale, with the collaboration of Pellissippi State Community College Dean and History Professor Jonathan Fowler, and Middle Tennessee State University English Professor William Levine, audited the English program at Motlow State Community College (MSCC). The committee met in a conference room of Motlow’s beautiful library facility with the Interim Vice-President for Academic Affairs Dawn Copeland, members of the English faculty, including Department Chair Wes Spratlin, assorted students in the English program, and relevant support staff and faculty from other disciplines.

Overall Performance

The auditor committee was greatly impressed. After several years of administrative and department level instability, the Motlow Community College English program now has decisive leadership, which has established clear Program Objectives, Course Objectives, and Student Learning Objectives. Apparently, the only remaining steps to defining the program fully are adopting Institutional Objectives and connecting the Program Objectives to them.

Motlow’s academic culture clearly values its people. The auditors appreciate the English department’s efforts to include part-time faculty in their process to revitalize the program. Not only does this attitude show respect for part-time faculty as fellow faculty per se, but it also makes the process more thoroughly effective. Also, interviews with students indicated the full time faculty take a caring and attentive, student-centered approach to instruction, which the students greatly appreciated.

The English program’s curriculum has been revitalized to provide assignments more relevant to students’ lives. The full time faculty are starting to coordinate instruction across four campuses. And the part-time faculty are beginning to receive the oversight necessary to provide a consistent quality of education to the students.

Much remains to be done, but given the progress so far and the positive energy of the leadership and the faculty, the program should soon be fully revitalized.

Focal Area 1: Learning Outcomes

The English program at MSCC has taken a number of constructive measures in revamping its objectives since beginning its first self-study nearly two years ago. By far, its most promising program revision has been to implement a more practical set of aims for its general education composition requirements, English 1010 and 1020. By adopting appropriate textbooks and finding several other, related means to promote consistency among its many sections and instructors, the program has made great progress in defining and practicing realistic, transferable general education goals. The outcomes for these courses and their assignments clearly prepare students for writing requirements in other academic disciplines and, more broadly, for the types of analytical writing and thinking they may face in various professions. The focus for each major assignment has been squarely placed on its intended audiences, its rhetorical
situation and purpose, and the efficacy of its mode of development, such as the comparison and contrast of two different policy choices.

While these redefined objectives are clearly in the process of being disseminated to all involved faculty and students through model syllabi, the departmental website, and handbooks, the auditing team recognized the difficulty of ensuring consistency among the English program's many instructors, especially its adjuncts, and across several campuses. The assessment essays for both 1010 and 1020 are very particularly defined and far more effectively coordinated and evaluated than in the past; the design and purpose of the other formal essays in these courses, however, are still very much left to individual instructors with varying degrees of expertise and immersion in the aims of the program. The adoption of common textbooks, the wider visibility of the ideal outcomes, and the availability of model syllabi are not sufficient in themselves to achieve the redefined outcomes. While academic freedom and the opportunity to "teach to one's strength" are always admirable principles, the program still has much work to complete in encouraging and maintaining consistency among all the courses and their requirements.

Focal Area 2: Curriculum and Co-curriculum

As noted above, the freshman composition sequence of English 1010 and 1020 has been thoroughly improved, with the second course no longer focused on literary study but rather on real-world adaptation of writing modes. The research-based writing in English 1020 obviously builds on the critical thinking and basic rhetorical skills that are instilled in the first course. A proposal for "augmented" sections of English 1010 that would eliminate the program's stretch course and instead allow for the closely guided mainstreaming of students most in need of remediation is also promising, not least because it could lead to the eventual implementation of much-needed full-service writing centers at all MSCC sites.

While there is little or no doubt that the English discipline's Honors program offers academically enriched sections of general education sophomore literature classes, the department's self-study has for the most part not advised any curricular change for the standard sections of these courses. Even though the quality of these courses, too, can only be improved by the ongoing process of clearly defining and widely communicating their desired objectives, the current objectives mainly hinge on student comprehension of the literature's cultural significance, and the courses are nowhere near as writing-intensive as the freshman composition sequence. Perhaps at some later point in the department's self-study, the requirements and objectives of these courses could better dovetail with those of the earlier sequence. And while there is also little doubt that the department's shift towards more practical writing assignments in the composition courses aim for outcomes that are compatible with those of other liberal arts courses, especially those of Speech, the self-study thus far shows no indication of active collaboration with those departments in planning co-curricular goals.

Indeed, co-curriculum appears to be the focal area in most need of work. The auditing team was pleased to find that the English faculty play a major role in sustaining the college’s impressively
successful Honors program. Yet aside from that effort, the program should expand its co-curricular activities, including collaborating with other related disciplines to create academic synergy as well as inviting guest speakers, forming clubs, holding readings, etc. Central to this effort should be the development of a comprehensive writing center to serve all four campuses and the needs of the entire college community.

Focal Area 3: Teaching and Learning Methods

In many respects, the English Area had to reboot teaching and learning methods in 2012 since, as noted by faculty in the self-study, “we simply taught as we always had over and over again.” This reboot started with the establishment of a sub-committee that reviewed existing writing guidelines. The work of this committee stimulated a more comprehensive, program-wide re-examination of curriculum and teaching. This entailed establishing a point person, granting him/her release time, and scheduling numerous meetings and discussions.

The two primary results of these meetings were new student learning outcomes (SLO) based on the TBR general education standards, and a philosophical shift away from a ‘rhetorical mode’ approach in favor of the more real-world based ‘rhetorical situations’ tack (noted in Affirmation #1 of the Team Report). Faculty then collaborated to select new textbooks, class assignments, and grading approaches that would mesh with this philosophical turn. As for the latter, faculty opted for another paradigm shift from each instructor’s model of correctness, which tended to produce inconsistent judgments, to a modified rubric.

The shift to a rubric marked the first of several measures designed to foster program-wide coherence in curriculum and pedagogy (noted in Commendation #2 of the Team Report). In 2013 faculty collaborated, after much in-person and email discussion, to establish program best teaching practices based on a review of methods at other departments and institutions. These new best practices, along with many other useful tools, were subsequently published and posted to the program web site as part of the English Handbook which now serves as a ready-reference for all English faculty (noted in Commendation #2 of the Team Report).

While the program by its own admission lacked procedures and processes to develop, analyze and regularly review teaching methods based on best practices, the auditor team observed evidence in both the self-study and the on-site interviews that significant progress in this direction has been made.

Focal Area 4: Student Learning Assessment

The English program at Motlow has participated in the TBR General Education Assessment Initiative since its inception. As part of that initiative, faculty assign a common essay with specifically coherent standards. They subsequently employ a scoring rubric. In 2012 the program sub-committee noted low participation numbers (65 percent), as well as significant procedural problems, including general
confusion by part-time faculty and delayed delivery of the scoring rubric to faculty significantly after the common essay had already been graded. In response a program faculty committee developed a new rubric in keeping with the new SLOs that had been established that year. They also developed revised procedures so that faculty now received the rubric in a timely fashion and with clear instruction for its proper use. The most recent result of these changes was a greater participation rate (98 percent) and acceptable student performance on all but one of the learning outcomes. Plans are in place to review this outcome to determine what actions or adjustments might be in order.

The program also consults other assessment measures -- the ETS Proficiency Profile Assessment, Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and local employer and alumni surveys -- but has found their data of limited value.

The auditor team noted the program's development of a new rubric based on SLOs as an important achievement and significant evidence of progress in this area (noted in Commendation #2 and Affirmation #3).

The team noted, too, that while the existing common essay and rubric assessment appears to measure faculty participation and awareness, it lacks any ability to measure the degree to which faculty are actually applying the standards of the rubric. Accordingly we suggested a classroom observation system be instituted (noted in Recommendation #3). Equally important we encouraged the program to “hold calibration sessions and review a sample of rubric scored essays to ensure consistent application of grading criteria across all sections” (noted in Recommendation #2). This would mark an extension of processes that we already observed and would better allow for continuous improvement.

Focal Area 5: Quality Assurance

The Motlow English department has worked so far to implement quality assurance methods for the full-time faculty.

They now need to add measures for providing quality assurance for the part-time faculty. The committee recommends creating not only a system by which full-timers mentor adjuncts but also a system by which the department head and other full-time faculty members observe them regularly. Interviews with students confirm not only what the audit report claims, that adjunct faculty are weak teachers having to be “coached up,” but also that even with the current efforts at improvement, they are significantly weaker instructors than full-time faculty. The committee recommends that part-timers be trained to use Desire to Learn, that students turn in their work in D2L dropboxes, and that the department head be given access to monitor these dropboxes, which should include graded versions of the essays. Where this is not possible because of Internet access difficulties, the committee suggests implementing a system long used in other community colleges, in which students submit all their graded essays for the semester in folders (actual or virtual), which the adjuncts then submit to the department, and which the department head or other appointed full-time faculty members review for grading competence and writing quality.
In addition, the English program should hold grading calibration sessions and review a sample of rubric scored essays to ensure consistent application of grading criteria across all sections of their courses, including those taught by full-time faculty but especially among those taught by part-time faculty.

The auditors commend the intentions of the English faculty to produce a freshman composition handbook with standard syllabi, department procedures and sample essays. The concept should also be amended to produce a packet of lessons, exercises, and activities for the adjuncts to use in class so that the full-timers can, in essence, disseminate their recipes for classroom success.

As for part-time instructor recruitment difficulties mentioned in the audit report, during the visit, some discussion was held about strengthening the connections with the Middle Tennessee State University graduate program to allow more graduate students to teach for Motlow.

Conclusions

Commendation #1 – We commend the caring and attentive, student-centered approach the faculty members have shown their students.

Commendation #2 – We commend the development of an English faculty handbook and a grading rubric to standardize procedures and essay assessments.

Commendation #3 – We commend the English faculty’s major role in sustaining the college’s impressively successful honors program.

Commendation #4 – We commend the English program’s reworking of the General Education Assessment process to raise their completion rate from 65% to 98%.

Affirmation #1 – We appreciate the efforts to revitalize the writing courses to reflect real world situations and respond to the needs of other academic disciplines in the college.

Affirmation #2 – We appreciate the efforts to establish a mentoring program for part-time faculty.

Affirmation #3 – We appreciate the efforts to develop assessment standards as embodied in the program’s essay grading rubric.

Affirmation #4 – We appreciate the efforts to include part-time faculty in their process to revitalize the program.
Recommendation #1 – The College should develop a comprehensive writing center to serve all four campuses and the needs of the entire college community.

Recommendation #2 – The English program should hold grading calibration sessions and review a sample of rubric scored essays to ensure consistent application of grading criteria across all sections of their courses, especially among part-time faculty.

Recommendation #3 – The English program should create an classroom observation system to assess the quality of part-time faculty.

Recommendation #4 – The English program should expand its co-curricular activities, including collaborating with other related disciplines to create academic synergy as well as inviting guest speakers, forming clubs, holding readings, etc.