Introduction

My visit to the St. Norbert College English discipline on April 28-29, 2011, was a pleasure from start to finish. Well before the visit, the discipline presented its self-study / program review that thoughtfully discussed its mission, program objectives, learning outcomes, and curriculum; refreshingly in such a document, the department presented good evidence of its performance as measured directly through its portfolio process and indirectly through surveys. Karlyn Crowley, who organized the visit, was efficient, gracious, and thoughtful as she put together a rigorous schedule. Likewise, it was a pleasure to get to know the members of the discipline and some of its students. My conversations throughout the two-day visit were constructive and informative; it is clear that the department is functioning well and that all concerned are proud of its work. That the English discipline initiated this review speaks to its confidence and strengths, and I commend the discipline for its efforts toward self-improvement. Dean of the College and Academic Vice President Jeff Frick, Associate Dean for the Humanities and Fine Arts David Duquette, and President Thomas Kunkel were also very helpful in the visit. They were most supportive of the discipline’s work and eager to contribute to honest discussions about the college’s continuing efforts to improve.

I embarked upon this review with relatively little knowledge about St. Norbert College and its unique mission or about the work of the English discipline at the college. I left with much admiration for this community and its commitment to liberal arts education; communio serves as a fundamental commitment of the college and was very much on display during my visit to the campus. I offer this report in that spirit of open dialogue, communication, and collaboration and with the hope that it will serve to open further constructive discussion.

Mission

The discipline affirms its commitment to the college’s mission and to the Norbertine tradition of communio, an appropriate place to begin. The discipline emphasizes its dedication to students in a variety of ways that particularly characterize good liberal arts colleges—as classroom and organizational advisors and mentors, through collaborative projects and sponsorship of undergraduate research, and in nurturing intellectual and personal development. The discipline also states that “active-learning pedagogies” characterize its curriculum and serve to realize communio. However, it would be useful, I think, to work toward a fuller account of what distinguishes the mission of the English discipline within this unique community: In what ways does active learning look different in an intellectual Catholic setting than in other liberal arts contexts? Should service be a key part of such a mission? Does the critical role of the humanities to probe the
complexities of human consciousness take on different nuances within the Norbertine tradition? As the discipline struggles with the question of how to attract students in a culture that puts little value on the work of the humanities and that tends to approach college education in a largely instrumentalist framework, these questions about mission are crucial, not just the stuff of official statements.

I found some aspects of the discipline’s mission statement to be confusing; further discussion and clarification would, I think, be useful. First, the St. Norbert website presents the English discipline mission in this way:

The English discipline’s vision is to help English majors become caring, well-rounded citizens. English majors graduate with the knowledge, skills and desire necessary to make positive contributions to the communities they enter. To achieve that end, the English major includes the following:

• Coverage – students explore the broad canvas of English and American literature, which we recognize as an evolving rather than static body of work
• Skills – students practice the essential skills of critical inquiry through reading, analysis and academic writing
• Theory – students learn the debates that frame the study of literature and how to apply theoretical paradigms to readings of literature
• Language – students learn the debates that frame the study of literature and how to apply theoretical paradigms to readings of literature
• Creativity – students may pursue creative writing
• Service – students may serve the College and outside communities through academic organizations and extra-curricular project

The Program Review, in laying out objectives and outcomes, offers a slightly different version, with a list of four items:

• Coverage: The discipline will introduce students to English and American Literature, broadly defined as “the Canon” (which we recognize as an evolving rather than static body of work).
• Critical Theory and Language: The discipline will require students to study and practice the central modes of critical theory in the field.
• Skills: The discipline will help students to acquire and practice academic writing skills.
• Artistic Creativity: The discipline will introduce students to the production and aesthetics of creative work. It will encourage them to acquire and practice creative writing and thinking skills in workshop and literature courses.

Service is the item most conspicuously absent from the Program Review. The vagueness of the web statement about “students may serve the College and outside communities” perhaps indicates the discipline’s uncertainty about this as a significant piece of its mission. And it’s also safe to say that the web statement about producing “caring, well-rounded citizens” who can “make positive contributions to the communities they enter” is a most difficult outcome to assess. But I do think it’s possible to make service a real component of the
discipline’s mission and curriculum, and, as I’ll note later in this report, it already seems an important part of what happens at St. Norbert.

**Coverage** also seems an especially problematic part of the discipline’s objectives. The web statement stresses that “students explore” the “broad canvas” of English and American literature, an “evolving” landscape (emphasis mine). The description of objectives in the Program Review, however, uses the much weaker language “the discipline will *introduce*” students to English and American Literature” while again stressing the evolving nature of “the Canon.” The description of learning outcomes, the crucial specification of what students should *be able to do* after completing the program, offers still another formulation: (1) students will be able to “*identify* the key theoretical approaches to literature and employ these approaches…” and will be able to “*identify and describe*” the major developments in literary history…” (emphasis mine).

I dwell on this issue here because it seems not just a matter of phrasing in the various documents but a philosophical and conceptual tangle that underpins some of the difficult issues that confront the discipline. I find these issues worthy of further discussion:

- **“The Canon”:** The various statements give mixed signals about the “broad canvas” of literature that the discipline wants to cover, with “canon” and “coverage” suggesting at least some commitment to having all students read at least some key texts. Yet the discipline also makes clear that departments of English don’t agree on a fixed “canon” of mandatory texts and that today’s program should not be limited by old definitions. These positions don’t have to be contradictory, but I think the various statements reveal lack of agreement among the members of the discipline about their sense of the canon. Further, “coverage” seems to apply only to English and American literature, leaving out a rich vein of Anglophone and post-colonial literature.

- **Exploring versus introducing and identifying:** The web statement is most active, stating that students should be *exploring* a significant variety of works. The two other statements, by contrast, have the discipline *introducing* literature and students *identifying* and *describing* theoretical approaches and developments. These may be worthy goals, but they seem weak for a department committed to active learning. My sense from conversations with members of the discipline was that they were committed to teaching students how to *actively engage with*—that is, read carefully, with good questions and active curiosity, with attention to nuances of language, style, and context—a wide variety of literature in English ranging across periods, genres, and nationalities. Agreeing about such language might help untangle some other issues.

- **Theoretical approach, literary history:** “Coverage” seems less about theoretical approaches and more about breadth of texts being addressed; the first item in the list of learning outcomes under coverage seems out of place. Helping students understand how literary texts stand in intertextual “conversation” with each other over history seems an important goal of “coverage,” one more nuanced than being able to “identify and describe the major developments,” as listed in the outcomes.
Again, opening this language to further discussion and critique would seem useful.

My comments about the other objectives and learning outcomes will necessarily be briefer. Critical Theory and Language, listed separately in the web version, are joined in the statement of objectives and outcomes; Language, in the web version, mentions only “study of a foreign language,” something not listed under objectives or outcomes. Again, I find the wording under outcomes to be somewhat flaccid and confusing. Students will “identify and describe the historical and contemporary debates.” Or should they be able to participate in those debates and understand different kinds of arguments and assumptions involved in literary interpretation? Students will “demonstrate an understanding of the literary canon” as complex and dynamic. Is this something better listed under “coverage”? Students will show that they are “sensitive to issues of diversity across a wide range of experiential factors.” Again, is this primarily an issue of theory and language or coverage? Is “sensitivity” an outcome that can be measured or demonstrated? Finally, if English majors should be expected to demonstrate mastery of the English language—and knowledge of its grammar and history—that seems worth specifying.

The language about Skills emphasizes academic writing, with the outcomes statement using the verbs “compose” (thesis statements), “support” (arguments), “identify” (significance of arguments), and “understand” (writing as a process). Again, it seems possible to make this language more ambitious. Composing thesis statements is certainly useful, but knowing how to make arguments without an explicit thesis statement or how to deduce a thesis also seem important; understanding writing as a process must also be accompanied with evidence that students have actively revised and reconceptualized their written work. The web version of the mission states that students “practice the essential skills of critical inquiry through reading, analysis, and academic writing,” and it seems worth exploring whether critical reading and analysis should be clearly articulated as desired outcomes; they certainly seem central to most conceptions of what English majors should do. Similarly, as the discussion of the Teagle-MLA Report notes on p. 5 of the Program Review, the skills of being able to use language orally (especially in making interpretations of texts) and to manipulate and compose digital texts seem important for the 21st-century English major, skills about which the documents are silent.

Finally, the web statement about Creativity seems especially weak—“students may pursue creative writing”—in contrast to the objectives statement, which offers a firmer commitment to introducing students to “the production and aesthetics of creative work.” Given that the discipline only “encourages” students to “acquire and practice creative writing and thinking skills,” it’s not clear how it can then state as an outcome that “students will practice creative learning and writing strategies.” It would seem useful to discuss how students who do not choose to take a creative writing course will fulfill this outcome and in which courses all students in the department practice “creative learning strategies” (or what exactly the discipline means by that term).
I would reiterate that this rather lengthy analysis of the mission is offered in the spirit of a constructive prompt for further discussion. I have no doubt that my reading of these documents provides only partial insight into the assumptions, practices, and approaches of the English discipline. Yet my training as a literary scholar teaches me that the contradictions, opacities, and resistances of the text usually bear further scrutiny and discussion. Sharpening these statements of outcomes also matters greatly for how students are asked to write about their experiences in their senior portfolio; only if the goals of the discipline are clear can it effectively assess whether it has been successful in its instruction.

**Curriculum**

Many of my discussions with members of the discipline focused on aspects of the curriculum; the key issues seem to center on the introduction to the major, the Major Authors requirement, and the depth of coverage. While those discussions did not include much reflection on the three options for the major, that also seems a topic worth investigating further, as does what might be described as the "developmental arc" of the curriculum—the way in which it guides students from novices to experts, from introductory courses through intermediate and advanced levels.

*Introduction to the Major*

Members of the discipline consistently reported frustration with what seems to be a lower-than-expected or desired number of majors; in part, this seems to be an issue connected with opportunities to "recruit" majors or to introduce them to the attractions of the major. This is a problem for most English departments across the country, as students increasingly seek college majors that they believe will prepare them for careers. Helping students understand how the central skills gained in the English major—critical thinking and analysis, strong reading, writing, and speaking abilities—translate into careers, not just first jobs, is a distinct challenge and opportunity for both departments and institutions. For most English departments, first-year seminar classes and introductory composition classes most often serve as venues to introduce students to English faculty and to the promises of the discipline. At St. Norbert, the majority of this introductory work apparently must occur in one course, English 150: Introduction to Literature.

Comments about this topic, I realize, must be provisional, given the uncertain state of general education revision at St. Norbert. It seemed clear to me that revisions that would lead to a first-year seminar and to greater flexibility in the ways students might demonstrate competencies could benefit the English discipline. But it also seemed possible that the problems of the current English 150 course, including the perception by many in the discipline that the course is limiting and not particularly engaging for students, could easily be addressed. Among the viable options explored in various discussions are these:

- Create various topic or genre courses that better track with faculty expertise and interests. If the discipline can agree on a common set of goals for these variations—commitments to teaching approaches to theory and writing, to methods of interpretation and argument, to scope of
readings—it seems possible for all members of the discipline to find ways to teach this important course with enthusiasm. It seems likely that the variety of options would be attractive to students.

- Consider offering a special section of English 150 for potential majors. The current structure makes it difficult to offer both a general introduction to the discipline of literary study and a course that meets the more general goals of GS-5 and GS-9. If such a course were to be offered, the English discipline might also better address a need identified by both students and faculty—the introduction of theoretical perspectives prior to the ENGL 305 course. While the 305 course seems to be working very well, students noted that they could have used more theoretical grounding in approaching the English and American surveys or some of the advanced-level literature classes (which can be taken before 305). If some sections of 150 were to include more discussion of “approaches to literature,” in essence, basic theoretical “moves,” students might have stronger grounding as interpreters as they approach other courses.

- Investigate other options to introduce students to the study of English, including an introductory creative writing class (to meet GS-5) or an American literature course (to meet GS-6).

**Major Authors**

The requirement that English majors take a course focused on one of three major English authors—Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton—provoked much discussion with both faculty and students; the requirement, though certainly defensible, warrants further discussion and reflection. Several issues emerge:

- The current composition of the English discipline has made this requirement nearly the exclusive domain of one faculty member. While by all accounts that faculty member is an exemplary teacher who enjoys great respect and affection from his students, this situation seems less than ideal. If the discipline is committed to this requirement, it must find a way to staff these courses so that the entire burden does not fall on a single person and so that students have more options for fulfilling the requirement.

- If the intent of this requirement is to enforce some “coverage” of the essential (as traditionally defined) canon of English literature, it seems a reasonable but insufficient gesture. Surely, one might insist, an English major must read deeply in Shakespeare’s work, but what happens if they choose the Chaucer course? And if a student takes only the Milton course, it’s possible they will not have read any English literature written before 1625. The required survey courses fill some gaps, but the choice of an early English survey and Chaucer would leave a student with little coverage of post-Restoration literature.

  Most English departments with which I’m acquainted have found different ways to ensure coverage. Beloit College, for instance, requires that at least one of five elective courses for the major must be in American literature, and at least one must be in British literature; of those five units, two must be in “early” literature and two must be in “later” literature. Beloit tends to offer flexible topic and period courses rather than single-author courses. Luther College, another “aspirant” college for St. Norbert,
requires a course in Shakespeare but also mandates another course from a
group of early English literature intensives (including Chaucer and
Milton), from a group of post-Restoration topics (including the British	novel), and from a group of American literature topics (including African-
American literature and the American novel). Lake Forest College, a
“peer” college for St. Norbert, requires a three-course sequence of “classics
of literature” (Ancient and Medieval, English Renaissance and 18th
Century, English 19th and 20th centuries), two courses in American
literature (one before the 19th century, one from the 20th century), and
two more from a long list of electives, including Shakespeare, Chaucer,
Milton, and also Melville, Dickinson, Yeats, Modern Fiction, and Modern
Poetry.

• The stipulation that students must read one of the “big three” English
authors struck many in the discipline, including students, as arbitrary, in
the face of the mission statement’s insistence that the canon is “evolving.”
While arguments about the relative importance of one author over the
other are ultimately not productive—if Milton, why not Joyce or Woolf or
Melville or Austen?—the requirement has produced such discussion and
some dissent.

• If the intent of the requirement is to guarantee that students will study
the works of a single author in some depth, a reasonable and important goal,
it would seem that other “major” authors could be added to the list. The
list of authors whose oeuvres would warrant sustained study in an upper-
level course is large, and opening this requirement up to reflect the
diversity and range of the list would further address the discipline’s goal
of introducing students to an evolving canon.

I have no recommendation to make to the English discipline regarding this
requirement other than to open it up for honest discussion. My sense is that the
current arrangement leaves many students and faculty members frustrated and
does not best address the stated goals of the discipline.

Depth of Coverage
Not having seen a listing of the courses offered by the discipline over the past
several years, it is difficult to judge the depth of coverage offered. The list of
courses in the college catalog seems reasonably robust and typical of offerings in
small English departments (although consider sharpening the course
descriptions; the listing for ENGL 225, for instance, is neither inviting nor
illustrative of good writing: “This course provides an overview of the continuity
and development of the tradition of literature of the British Isles from the Anglo-
Saxon period through Samuel Johnson”). Yet, in comparison to aspirant colleges
such as Beloit, there seem to be significant gaps, gaps that would appear to be
especially problematic for students headed to graduate school. For instance,
while the 225-226 survey sequence offers students good coverage over the range
of English literature, students seeking more in-depth study of this area have only
322 (Medieval), 325 (Chaucer), 334 (Milton), 339 (Shakespeare), and 358
(Nineteenth-Century English Novel) from which to choose; the variable topics
course 289 and seminar class 489 undoubtedly offer more choices, but courses in
18th-century literature, the Romantics or Victorians, and 20th-century British
literature, staples of most departments, are missing. The American literature options seem more robust.

Again, I lack sufficient information to know if the list of courses offered by the English discipline is quirky, usefully eclectic, or carefully constructed. Courses such as 203 (Science Fiction and Fantasy), 312 (Singles and Couples), and 321 (Dante) suggest the first adjective and raise questions about why these topics and not others, why this great author in translation and not others? Given the gaps noted above it seems that it would be useful to consider the possibilities for more consistent “coverage,” especially if that remains a key part of the disciplinary mission. It also isn’t entirely clear what role the 289 special topics courses play in the normal rotation of classes offered. Surely these courses allow instructors to teach topics of interest to them and to give students a range choices, but I could not fully understand the place of these courses in the overall scheme of “coverage.”

Three other issues arise regarding the curriculum. First, the discipline expresses its commitment to “innovative” instruction, but it’s difficult to place St. Norbert in the category of nationally innovative English curricula. For that to happen, the discipline will most likely have to adjust some of its commitments to “coverage,” and the college will need to find ways to sponsor more team-taught and interdisciplinary courses. Second, the English discipline appears to have some issues with the scheduling of its courses. Some of the problem, according to students, was the piling up of desirable courses in the same few time slots; that, in turn, seems to be part of a larger college issue of deciding on whether two, three, or four class meetings per week is ideal. Finally, the enrollment patterns in English—and the surprisingly low numbers for Fall 2011 classes—are perhaps increasingly affected by student enrollments in J-term (from the website: “You’ll be surprised how easy and affordable it is to get ahead by taking a J-term course at St. Norbert. Complete a semester’s worth of work in three week’s time.”), May term, summer terms, and study abroad. It would be helpful to know what portion of English major programs get fulfilled in those venues.

I fully realize the challenges of offering a sequence of courses on a regular basis with a limited number of students and faculty. The key is usually a clear rotation over a two- or three-year cycle. It’s possible that such a rotation has been set up, but I wasn’t made aware of it.

The Developmental Arc
The students with whom I met spoke eloquently about the Eng 305: Literary Theory and Writing Course. They appreciated the rigor of the course and commented on the insights it offered them as readers of literature in subsequent English courses. In this respect, the disciplinary sequence of courses for the major seemed very strong and helpful for students. One student in particular talked about first taking the two survey courses (having been exempted from the Introduction to Literature course because of a high school advanced-placement course), then the theory course, then several upper-level electives, each of them building on the others. But other students in the group reported a more haphazard pathway through the major, taking Eng 305 late in their career,
simultaneously with one of the survey courses. My impression from the students and from the course listing was that the discipline might give more thought to insuring experiences for all its students that involve a systematic building of training from the introductory to the advanced level. While some flexibility is important for students who enter the study of English with different needs and strengths, my sense was that more structure and a clearer sense of the pathway from novice to expert would be helpful. If the discipline offers students some kind of “map” for the major, a guide to the requirements and suggestions about a pathway, I didn't see such a document. It would be useful, I think, to explain in writing to students the logic of the requirements of the major, advice how best to navigate it, and recommendations for students anticipating various career pathways.

The Three Options for the Major
The English major at St. Norbert currently offers three choices—the “standard” English major, an English major with Secondary Certification, or a creative writing emphasis. Such an arrangement is certainly familiar, but I saw little in the discipline's materials for students or in its self-study report that attempted to explain the differences in these sequences or the thinking behind them. The creative writing emphasis seems especially problematic in that it depends upon just one faculty member and only a few courses, beginning at the 300 level. It seems to me that if the creative writing option is to thrive at St. Norbert, as it does in so many English programs today, the discipline would need to consider lower-level introductory courses (including, perhaps, some that would fulfill a general education requirement) and adding other faculty in the department who can contribute to the program. The testimonials of students and the publication Graphos suggest that creative writing is alive and well at St. Norbert, but it doesn’t seem clear that a separate major track is warranted in this area. Likewise, the separate major for education majors, again consisting of just a few required courses, does not appear to be necessary. Is it possible that these special emphases could be handled by choosing electives and guided by advising rather than offering three different majors?

Capstone.
The English 489 “Advanced Seminar in English Literary Studies” seems to function well as an upper-level course, which, when combined with the English 499 Portfolio requirement, offers majors a strong “capstone” experience. But I found several pieces of this important aspect of the major confusing. First, the title of the 489 course promises a seminar in “English Literary Studies,” but the catalog listing includes topics such as “Gender and Sexuality in 19th-Century U.S. Literature”; should this be titled more broadly as a seminar in literary studies or literary issues? The course is also open to juniors, to non-majors, and to repeat enrollment (under a different topic). I would urge the department to consider making this course more directly targeted to graduating seniors in the major and more directly tied to the portfolio course. Doing so might allow the English discipline to demand more from the seminar and to provide students with more of a high-impact capstone experience. Additionally, such an arrangement might help to anchor the portfolio course within one person’s
teaching load, rather than its current status as “volunteer” work by members of the discipline.

*Experiential learning: internships, international experiences.*

The English discipline mentions in its report its exemplary engagement with Sigma Tau Delta, the English honorary society, and the opportunities it offers students for internships with Sigma Tau Delta. This activity is commendable and in many ways sets the English discipline apart from its peers. Based on what I heard from the two student groups, the opportunities to use the English major in applied ways—as interns for the Sigma Tau Delta journal, as tutors for the Writing Center, or as interns in the college’s Office of Communications—are most important and prized. Students report these experiences as transformative, as confirmation that their classroom learning is relevant, powerful, and applicable to other situations. Likewise, several students talked about their involvement in service at St. Norbert, but it seemed that such experiences were only tangentially related to their experiences in the English major. I would encourage the English discipline to think more about how these opportunities to perform the major through internships, practica, and service learning might be systematized and built more intentionally into the program. Similarly, several students mentioned the importance of international experiences, but it wasn’t evident to me that the English discipline has systematically exploited the place of such courses in its curriculum. As noted above, students today need a stronger sense of why English might prepare them for careers and a lifetime of learning; experiential learning opportunities seem an especially vital way for the discipline to help students make these discoveries.

**Assessment of Student Learning**

The English discipline appears to have set up a workable system for assessing its effectiveness by using both direct evidence through the senior portfolio and indirect evidence in the form of majors and alumni surveys. One crucial aspect of any good assessment program is that a department use the information about strengths and weaknesses to make changes, and that seems to be true of the English discipline at St. Norbert. As noted in the report, the discipline has recently targeted thesis building and research skills, and it is crucial that similar targeting and improvement be carried through to all the English goals and outcomes. As noted above, a clearer statement of expected outcomes (“students should be able to…”) will provide a clearer basis upon which the direct evidence in the portfolios can be evaluated and acted upon.

The declining level of overall satisfaction for English majors six years out of the program is puzzling and bears further study. The report suggests that the current economic situation and poor job market has caused alumni “to question their preparation.” The suggestion that the discipline can better help students “identify their strengths and skills as English majors” seems right; it also seems that the discipline can do more to help students think about how their experience in the program connects to “real-world” skills and could, perhaps, place more emphasis on internships and practica to do some of that work. That 43% of English alums are very satisfied with the overall experience of the major six years
out of college is very good; but that 36% of that group is less than satisfied gives some cause for concern. The relatively modest level of satisfaction with the range of courses offered (28% very satisfied; 40% satisfied in 2009) reflects the responses students shared with me and confirms the point made above about the curriculum and “coverage.” As is true of all assessment efforts, attempts to address the concerns uncovered in the surveys should be systematic and regular. Some of those efforts are noted in the English report, but this work might be more fully addressed, especially in areas such as opportunity to publish, assistance with study skills, feedback on academic work, and intellectual challenge. Finally, it would also be instructive to the program to engage in more systematic analysis of transcripts (what are the various pathways through the major?) and exit interviews with majors.

Resources

People. The members of the English discipline appear to be fully committed to their work as teacher-scholars. Their c.v.’s show them to be active scholars, with good levels of publication and professional engagement. As the English report notes, members of the discipline are highly engaged in sponsoring student research through Sigma Tau Delta and have been equally productive with their individual research. By the accounts of colleagues and college leadership, the English discipline is exemplary in their work as individual teacher-scholars, as a functioning team of colleagues, and as contributors to the college’s overall mission.

The English Program Review makes only a perfunctory case for expanding its staff: “we would like to add, sooner rather than later, a person who can contribute to our course offerings in drama and the early periods of English literature.” As noted above regarding “coverage,” if the English discipline is to maintain its commitment to “coverage” (and to clarify those goals), additional staff in English literature before 1900 seems crucial. In comparison to similar liberal arts college English departments, the English discipline at St. Norbert’s seems unbalanced in the direction of modern American literature, and some shoring up in English literature seems necessary. I see two other causes for concern. According to the English Program Review, 27% of English course sections were taught by part-time faculty in 2009; in 2007 the number was 33%. Members of the discipline expressed confidence in their part-time colleagues and seemed disinclined to try converting some of the part-time work into a full-time, tenure-track position. But having almost a third of the discipline’s courses taught by part-time faculty, no matter how good those instructors might be, has ramifications for advising, for supervision of independent-study and practicum work, and for the long-range planning of the discipline. It seems probable that St. Norbert’s aspirant group would have larger numbers of full-time faculty for equal numbers of majors. The issue of part-time faculty is exacerbated by the dual responsibilities of most full-time members of the discipline. English faculty are involved in directing (or have recently directed) Women’s and Gender Studies, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, the American Studies Program, service learning, the institution’s undergraduate research effort—not to mention campus and professional committees. This exemplary work is a great
boon to the institution but leaves the English discipline stretched. I’m particularly struck by the Writing Program, which, for sound reasons, is autonomous from the English discipline; however, that arrangement leaves the discipline with only a half-time position focused on writing and a colleague physically isolated in the library.

In short, I think a stronger case can be made for additional staff in the English discipline than is made in the Program Review; even though English enrollments for Fall 2011 are not as strong as hoped for, the discipline’s continuing involvement in general education and interdisciplinary programs leaves it in less than optimal position for meeting its core obligations.

Facilities. The English Program Review does not address the issue of classroom spaces, faculty offices, or technology, but I believe a thorough review of the discipline should address these matters. A quick, ad-hoc visit to some of the main classrooms for English courses in Boyle Hall revealed serviceable classrooms but technology set-ups featuring low-end “Smart Boards” that seem not particularly well-suited for English classrooms. In conversation with several members of the discipline, I got the impression that the discipline and the college could work to better address the technology needs of the English discipline; in particular, digital display presenters (“Elmo’s”) would most likely be of more use to the English discipline than the current set-ups in Boyle. Similarly, if English classes feature discussion more than lectures, the technology displays in Boyle that I saw seem inadequate, for they are configured with the default of “sages on the stage.”

Library. I understand that the template for the review of the English discipline does not ask for review of library holdings, but I would recommend that future reviews include a collection review. A strong program in English requires a strong library, and an adequate collection for undergraduates, resources available for faculty research, and instructional resources for students would seem as important for English as excellent laboratory facilities for chemistry or biology.

Conclusions and Summary of Recommendations

As I noted at the start of this report, the English discipline at St. Norbert College is functioning at a high level, with faculty members who are dedicated teachers and engaged scholars and who also maintain an extraordinary level of service to the institution. By all measures, the contributions of the English discipline to the college are significant; a strong liberal arts college needs core strength in English, and St. Norbert College is fortunate to have such a strong core. In a time when the humanities face challenges from many quarters and students increasingly see college as a pathway to a first job rather than careers and training for life-long learning, the institution needs to help disciplines like English maintain its strength and attract student interest. Clearly, more can be done in this area, including greater cooperation between English and the Admissions Office; the efforts would strengthen both the English discipline and the stature of St. Norbert College. Additionally, members of the discipline reported that they
would appreciate more recognition from the institution for their work as teacher-scholars. Such efforts don’t require much in the way of resources, just attention to achievements and frequent celebration of work well done.

While this review notes much that can be improved in the English discipline, the commitment to assessment and the willingness to examine current practices— signaled clearly in the desire for this review—indicate a strong program ready to become stronger. That process would be assisted, I think, if the Program Review that provides the foundation for this external review pushed more toward envisioning the future, perhaps in a five-year plan that set out new goals, considered potential changes or growth, and committed to new initiatives. While its difficult to predict what might happen in the next five years, it would be useful for the English discipline to plan more directly for its future.

In summary, the key recommendations listed above include:

1. Sharpen the mission of the discipline, making the web statement and disciplinary objectives and outcomes more consonant and more active in their orientation. Consider whether the English mission can more uniquely articulate a vision of Norbertine education in the humanities.

2. Consider altering the current curriculum to provide more inviting introductions to the major, a clearer and broader interpretation of “coverage,” and a more well-defined capstone experience.

3. Continue to build on the discipline’s excellent assessment efforts, insuring that appropriate change and improvement follow from collection and analysis of data; consider adding transcript analysis and focus group meetings to gain further knowledge of student pathways through the major.

0 Create a five-year plan for the discipline that takes into consideration staffing needs (and the likely continuation of joint appointments and heavy general education contributions), potential retirements, and shifts in the curriculum. Work with the Admissions Office to develop ways to alert more students to the value of the English major while strengthening experiential learning opportunities in the program.

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