

English Department White Paper: Gathering Information to Facilitate Change in Undergraduate Education

In the fall of 2017, the English Department convened an ad-hoc committee on undergraduate curriculum revision whose mission is to “rethink the English major.” Our rethinking has been prompted by several concerns, including shifts within the scholarly discipline, the decline of English majors, and the future expectations of graduates with a degree in English. Our goal is to design an undergraduate program which offers opportunities for interdisciplinary work, internships and other “real world” interfaces, and provides coverage of material directed at expanding new dimensions of literary scholarship, including digital humanities.

The committee is charged with investigating the relevance of existing requirements, such as historical period coverage, in light of what teachers and researchers are doing in our peer institutions across the country. We hired one of our own undergraduates to conduct a survey looking at 82 peer public institutions and 34 private ones, detailing what each requires for its English major. The survey recorded how each institution resolved important questions about content and coverage: what historical distribution is required? Is literary theory integral to the major? Is there a course devoted to reading poetry? Does the major incorporate expository writing? Creative writing? How do other programs handle Honors? How have other programs established a joint BA/MA program in English? How do current major requirements insure diversity of coverage and of theme?

The committee is using the results of this survey to determine what we think are “best practices” based on our peer institutions. In addition, the department sponsored a massive student-based survey in the fall of 2017, which was given to all students in every English class, not just to majors. The extensive survey asked questions about student needs and student satisfaction with English department offerings. This is partly in response to the new open core curriculum; we need to know how to attract students to our courses. More importantly, however, the results of this survey will give the committee detailed information about the students’ perspectives, so that we can see how to align our goals for the major with student hopes and needs.

Once the results of the second survey are tallied, our next step will be utilizing all of this information to formulate directions for our new major—in both content and form—to maximally utilize the expertise of our faculty and provide expanded undergraduate opportunities for research, internships, and interdisciplinary work.

While this revisioning is going on, we are also exploring pedagogical innovations to match our teaching with the changes in the major. English Department faculty and courses already work with other programs and colleges, such as Art History and CMCC, to move beyond the classroom and text model to provide students with experience in printing and the material existence of books and with digital humanities, which is clearly the wave of the future. In the fall of 2018, the English department will be the first of the Humanities programs at CU to adopt the Learning Assistant model used so successfully in the hard sciences. This, along with our commitment to developing more emphasis on online and digital learning models, will help bring our teaching methods in line with the best practices evidenced at our peer institutions.