

## **Program Assessment Report**

### **Humanities, Philosophy, and the Arts Program**

**Fall 2014**

#### **Background**

The Humanities, Philosophy and the Arts (HPA) major is one of seven interdisciplinary programs offered in the Riverside Community College district. In terms of students who complete the major, it is Norco College's third most popular, after Social and Behavioral Studies and Math and Science. In recent years, approximately 1 out of 11 Norco College graduates majored in this degree: 68 students in 2011, 84 in 2012, 88 in 2013, and 114 in 2014. While it seems likely that this number will plateau or perhaps decline as a result of ADT degrees now offered in such fields as English, Spanish, and Philosophy, it may well be that many students will still prefer to be less specialized in their first two years of college.

In 2013-14, Norco College undertook a vigorous effort to assess each of its area of emphasis (AOE) programs. The results of that study may be found at [X](#). The HPA assessment project focused on the first of the program's five program-level outcomes: "Interpret key philosophical, religious and literary texts, as well as creative works, in historical and cultural contexts and express that interpretation persuasively in oral and/or written form." Targeted classes were chosen and students assessed on a four-point scale by their instructors in terms of how well sample work demonstrated achievement of that outcome. No effort was made initially to look specifically at students in the major, since Norco College students are not required (only encouraged) to choose a specific major before graduation. Instead, scores on student artifacts were collected along with student ID numbers, making it possible to determine how well students in aggregate did in relation to the number of courses they had already taken in the major. The assumption was that the more courses students had taken in the major, the more likely they were to be IN the major.

The study showed that students who had completed between 9 and 18 units in the major did significantly better than those who had completed fewer than 9 units. The 61 students in the former group had a mean score of 3.13, while the 93 in the later had a mean score of 2.55. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the 20 students who had completed more than 18 units in the major had a mean score of 2.50. Several theories were developed to explain this apparent anomaly, with issues related to the design of the study itself seeming likely to be the most accurate. Some concern was also expressed by participants that the PLO itself was awkward and imprecisely worded, allowing for too many diverse interpretations of its meaning. The numbers also appeared to be skewed by the judgment of one instructor that only 14 of his 58 students demonstrated clear or marginal competency in this outcome, at significant variance from the judgment of other instructors of the same course

(and indeed other Humanities instructors). Accordingly, a follow-up study was conducted in the spring of 2014, with various efforts employed to increase face validity and reliability of the scoring.

For the 2014 study, a different and more intelligible PLO was chosen (“Research and write critical interpretive essays demonstrating a high skill level”) and a number of emails exchanged among participants to ensure that they agreed on the meaning of the outcome. (Associate faculty participating in the project were paid a \$150 stipend to help in the collection and analysis of data, and the production of this report.) Since not every instructor assigned source-based writing, a decision was made to focus exclusively on that portion of the PLO that began with the word “write.” We endeavored to determine whether students could produce fluent, organized, coherent, and grammatically correct prose on the assigned topic.

A more detailed rubric was also developed with this project, and it was discussed electronically. It is as follows:

**A four essay** contains clear evidence of PLO achievement. It is a coherent, organized, and intelligible argument or analysis, logically and effectively developed, fluent and largely free of grammatical error. (It does not have to be perfect, but problems in coherence, organization, grammar, usage, etc. should be relatively minor and should not significantly detract from intelligibility.) It is likely to be the equivalent of A or B writing.

**A three essay** contains adequate evidence of PLO achievement. It is a mostly coherent, organized, and intelligible argument or analysis, with adequate logic and development, reasonably fluent, with perhaps some relatively minor grammatical errors though with few or no major ones. It is likely to be the equivalent of B- to C (or even C-) writing.

**A two essay** contains inadequate evidence of PLO achievement. It may contain significant problems in coherence, organization, and/or intelligibility. It may be poorly developed or contain significant problems in logic. It may have a pervasive pattern of grammatical error. It is likely to be the equivalent of C- to D writing.

**A one essay** contains little or no evidence of PLO achievement. Serious problems exist in one or more of the following areas: coherence, organization, logic, development, and/or grammar. It is likely to be the equivalent of D- to F writing.

Eight courses in spring 2014 were identified as ones that HPA students were likely to enroll in and therefore used in the study: Art 2 (History of Western Art: Renaissance through Contemporary), Art 7 (Women Artists in History), English 7 (British Literature Survey II: Romanticism through Modernism/Postmodernism), English 30 (Children’s Literature), History 25 (History of Mexico), Humanities 5 (Arts and Ideas: The Renaissance through the Modern Era), Philosophy 33 (Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy), and Spanish 4 (further development of intermediate skills in listening, reading, speaking, and writing

Spanish). Two sections of Humanities 5 were taught, by two different instructors, and both were assessed. Humanities 5 was the only course used in both the 2013 and 2014 studies.

One other modification was made in the assessment methodology: instructors of these classes surveyed their students to see which ones were planning to major in a field in the humanities, either at Norco or upon transfer to a university, and could therefore be assumed to be “in” the HPA program even if they were unaware that they were. This reduced considerably the number of artifacts scored. For example, in one section of Humanities 5 in which 23 students completed the course, only six students indicated they were likely humanities majors: four in history, one in music, and one in theater. All of these modifications in assessment—choosing a clearer PLO and discussing it at some length, developing a more rigorous rubric, and identifying likely HPA majors—were made to maximize validity and reliability of the scores.

## Results

Instructors were asked to score a late-term writing assignment (usually an out-of-class essay, but in a few cases in-class exam responses) in terms of the rubric. Results by class are as follows:

**Art 2** (11 Studio Art majors, one Theater major, one History major, one Religious Studies major): no students scored 4; two students scored 3.5; 10 students scored 3; two students scored 2.5

**Art 7** (three Studio Art majors; one major each in History, Film, Art History, Music, Spanish, and English): Two students scored 4, 3 students scored 3.5, 3 students scored 3, 1 student scored 2.5

**English 7** (eight English majors, one History major): eight students scored 4, one student scored 3.5.

**English 30** (seven Humanities majors, three English majors, two Liberal Studies majors, two Music majors): eight students scored 4, five students scored 3, one student scored 2.

**History 25** (two History majors, one Liberal Arts major): two students scored 4, one student scored 3.5.<sup>1</sup>

**Humanities 5, section 1** (four History majors, one Music major, one Theater major): five students scored 4, one student scored 3.

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<sup>1</sup> This was an extra-credit assignment, suggesting that the work of some prospective majors in the course was not included in this study.

**Humanities 5, section 2** (two English majors, one Spanish major): all three students scored 4.

**Philosophy 33** (specific majors not identified): one student scored 4, three students scored 3.

**Spanish 4** (three Spanish majors or minors, one Linguistics major): two students scores 4, one student scored 3, one student scored 1.

**Overall results:** A total of 62 student artifacts were evaluated. Of that 62, 57 (92%) were seen as demonstrating competency in the PLO under consideration. The average score was 3.41.

### **Analysis of Data and Recommendations**

The students in the 2014 HPA assessment scored significantly higher for demonstrating PLO competency than their counterparts did in 2013. Of course different methodologies were employed to evaluate each set of artifacts, different classes were assessed, and different (though related) PLOs were studied, so it would not be prudent to make too much of the scores in comparative terms. But it seems likely, for the reasons mentioned earlier, that the 2014 study generated results that can be considered more valid and reliable because of the greater rigor of the methodology employed. The conclusion can legitimately be drawn that the vast majority of the Norco College students who plan to major in the Humanities and took Humanities classes in Spring 2014 at the college can write fluent and intelligible academic prose at a college level.

Given the constraints community college instructors operate under, it is not clear how the methodology of assessing PLOs in a program like HPA could be further improved. It would be very useful to bring groups of instructors together for common readings, in which evaluators were formally normed and then set to evaluate the work of students not in their own classes. But this is a time-consuming task, and even if the time were found to undertake it, it is not clear that, for example, an English instructor could accurately evaluate the writing competency of students in a Philosophy or Art History class—to say nothing of students in an advanced Spanish class writing in Spanish. The methodology employed in 2014 is a sufficiently rigorous approach to generating meaningful information about student learning in the program.

That is not to say, though, that the program itself cannot be improved in light of the two assessment studies just undertaken. The PLOs themselves are not well written, and at least one probably needs to be eliminated, as noted in the 2013 report. Some courses defined as part of the program do not really belong in the program—and others not included probably need to be. The college (indeed, the district) does not have an effective mechanism for ensuring that modifications to its interdisciplinary

programs are made when necessary. More importantly, the college does not do enough to publicize the existence of its programs or to develop a “program consciousness” within its students.

An idea worth exploring that might help in both of these areas would be the formation of a committee, or work group, devoted to the care and feeding of the major interdisciplinary programs, including HPA. Such a group could be responsible for curriculum in and assessment of the program, and it might do outreach to students to make them better aware that HPA exists as a major at the college. Such a committee would not need to meet monthly; even very occasional meetings could be beneficial. It could, for example, consider the idea of developing a capstone course for the major, or at least the creation of a repository (probably in the form of an electronic portfolio) of student work that demonstrated their achievement of the program’s learning outcomes. It is hard to envision real improvement in the program without its faculty coming together periodically to share ideas. In the meantime, we can console ourselves with the knowledge that Humanities-inclined students are for the most part able to write effectively.