Minutes of the University Core Development Committee, Thursday, November 29, 2012.

The meeting came to order at about 9:35 a.m.

Present were Nasser Behnegar, Patrick Byrne, Clare Dunsford, Arthur Madigan, Suzanne Matson, Patrick McQuillan, Catherine Read, and James Weiss.

Also present for the greater part of the meeting was Paula Mathieu of the Freshman Writing Program.

The minutes of the meeting of the meeting of November 8, 2012 were accepted with two corrections.

The next order of business was conversation with Paula Mathieu about assessment in the Freshman Writing Program. Ms. Mathieu distributed a handout entitled “FWS Assessment Plan.” The plan provides a checklist to help determine whether this mutli-section course is in fact meeting its goals. The goal of critical thinking, reading, and writing is complex, and the plan has select certain goals to focus on for assessment this time around. The plan is for a group (the director, the assistant director, two doctoral students, and other faculty who wish to be involved) to develop a scoring rubric during the break between semesters or in January. The aim is to identify some specific pedagogical goal that we could be doing better. The plan includes provision for collecting 150-175 student papers (preferably in electronic versions, with no names to identify students or faculty) and then having a committee read 25% of the papers collected.

The committee was impressed with the straightforwardness and good sense of the assessment plan. At the same time, we had a number of questions. A colleague asked about the plan’s reference to “complex relationships among language, knowledge, and power.” Paula Mathieu explained that the program tries to teach students how to deal with texts by authority figures and how to use sources critically. Students in the program report that they have never been asked to develop their own independent arguments. Paula Mathieu noted that there was an issue about which paper assignment should be collected. She suggested that it would not be advisable to base the assessment of all the different goals on one assignment.

A colleague asked about the development of the scoring rubric. Paula Mathieu said that the plan was for a group to take three or four essays, read and discuss them, and develop shared vocabulary and criteria by which to evaluate the others. She referred to this as a norming session. Another colleague pointed out that the selection of papers needs to be genuinely random, so that the results are valid and can be shared. There was some discussion of how random the selection could be without slowing down the assessment process. Another colleague suggested that the assessment might use a representative sample the first time around, then switch to a more random sampling at a later stage. Another colleague agreed, citing the momentum that the assessment process has. He then recalled how he had initially been worried when he learned that we were under the gun to do assessment, but found assessment expert Barbara Walvoord’s approach to assessment more humane. He saw the FWS plan as in line with Walvoord’s approach.

A colleague then asked Paula Mathieu whether students were well served by being exempted from the Freshman Writing Seminar on the strength of Advanced Placements. Paula Mathieu replied that the English Department has been thinking about this question. She thought that either the Writing Seminar should be required of all students, or other courses should be writing intensive. Another colleague asked how many students were exempted from the Writing Seminar. Suzanne Matson distributed a handout indicating that the answer was 695.

A colleague thought that it would be good to offer a second course in writing. Paula Mathieu replied that next year the English Department would start a course called Writing Workshop in which students would learn how to make an argument. Another colleague asked about the third bullet point in the last paragraph on p. 2 of the handout (“Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts.”) Paula Mathieu explained the term “affordance”: what the medium that you are using allows or requires you to do (e.g., a tweet is limited to 140 characters); also the choices that have to be made (e.g., when to use a graph and when to use a pie chart); and then the issue of how one gets people to read one’s work. The colleague thanked Paula Mathieu for the explanation and congratulated her on on the FWS Assessment Plan. Paula Mathieu referred the group to the website at the bottom of p. 1 of the plan.

This colleague then asked about the interface between the assessment plan and the learning goals on the cover pages that the UCDC had developed for core requirements such as Writing. He pointed out that the goals as listed on the plan do not quite match the goals listed on the cover pages (those goals being drawn from the 1991 Report). Paula Mathieu admitted that she was not familiar with the cover pages. The colleague asked her if she would take a look at the cover pages and offer the committee feedback on how helpful they are. Another colleague noted that one point on which Barbara Walvoord was insistent was that learning goals be stated in the format “Students will be able to . . . . ” Paula Mathieu pointed out that there was no guarantee that students would always be able to do the things that they had done in the context of a writing course. She suggested that the FWS Assessment Plan was the program’s cover sheet.

A colleague asked whether the students whose papers were collected and read would be aware of this fact. Paula Mathieu replied that it was not required to inform students or to seek their consent provided that the process was strictly internal to Boston College. The colleague suggested offering the students an opportunity to opt out of the process.

A colleague then asked how many different genres of writing the Writing Seminar typically covered. Paula Mathieu thought that the answer was probably three. She suggested that it was not necessary to cover many genres, provided that students realized that there were different genres and that, for example, using the first person singular was appropriate for some genres but not for others.

A colleague asked whether it might be possible to attend the norming session. Paula Mathieu said that this would be fine. This part of our meeting then concluded with thanks all around.

The next order of business was the draft of a message from the UCDC to departments that Arthur Madigan had circulated. The letter was approved with a friendly amendment.

The committee approved SL 220 Far Eastern Literary Masterpieces (Lydia Chiang) for Cultural Diversity core credit.

The committee approved UN 254 / SC 240 / BK 248 Community Research Seminar (Deborah Piatelli), submitted by the Office of AHANA Student Programs, for Cultural Diversity core credit.

Our meeting was adjourned at about 11:15 a.m.

Respectfully submitted by

Arthur Madigan, S.J.