The Department of English undertook a number of initiatives outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement of June, 2001. These are summarized here under the headings and in the order used in the MOA.

1. Curriculum

A. The Major Program

In 2001-2002, the department held a series of meetings to discuss ways of strengthening the undergraduate curriculum. Two autumn meetings, on September 28 and October 12, were spent in general discussion about courses and major programs. Faculty were then invited to submit proposals for changes in the undergraduate major curriculum, and four proposals (from three individuals and one group of faculty) were circulated at the end of February. In the spring, three meetings (March 8, April 8, April 29) were devoted to discussing these proposals.

The proposals offered two broad approaches to curriculum revision. Three of them sought to improve the current major within the framework of its literary and historical focus; these proposed adding requirements in language or courses in which students prepared longer research papers, for example, or sought to add concentrations in topics like Creative Writing and Gender and Ethnic Studies that would build on the courses in literary history. A fourth proposal, from a group of writing faculty, sought to implement a new major program, a separate track in Writing Studies. Discussion of these proposals was wide-ranging; in the spring, and in response to the Writing Studies proposal, a subcommittee was formed to propose new core or foundation courses that would link literature and writing so that two tracks might share the same introductory courses.

Although the goal in the Memorandum of Agreement was to decide on a direction for curriculum revision by the end of the 2001-2002 academic year, the number and variety of the issues raised by the curricular discussion made it difficult to arrive at a single direction or a consensus by the end of spring quarter. As the discussions made clear, faculty held differing views of the discipline: some wanted a major that provided broad knowledge, while others wanted more specialization; some saw historically organized literary study as central, others saw rhetoric as central. At the same time, there was a strong shared interest in the ways that texts might be studied and made meaningful in the classroom.
A straw vote at the April meeting suggested that no one of the February proposals would win majority support in its current design. The department’s APR committee concluded its work by suggesting that (1) revised proposals for the major might be submitted to the department’s Undergraduate Studies Committee in the coming year; and (2) the department might fruitfully continue its discussions of teaching in the discipline by separating those discussions from particular curricular proposals. Some members of the department agreed to devise seminars or symposia on topics of interest to both writing and literature faculty. (This series, called the Teaching Exchange, begins this fall.) Meanwhile, a pilot version of one of the new core courses will be offered in winter ’03. Although the year-long discussion of curriculum has not yet produced a revised major program, a number of new issues and proposals have been defined, and new curricular models are being explored.

B. Multiculturalism in the Curriculum

The department also held three informal discussions about enhancing multicultural perspectives within the curriculum. These extended throughout the year, with the first meeting in October, 2001, and two further meetings in April and May of 2002. About a dozen people attended the first session; fewer attended the spring meetings. At each meeting, faculty discussed readings or sample syllabi. In the process, definitions of multiculturalism were shared and faculty suggested ways of integrating multicultural perspectives into current major courses. At the fall meeting, definitions of multiculturalism and cross-cultural study were explored with particular attention to the kinds of inquiry and critical awareness faculty might foster in the classroom. In the spring meetings, a sample of secondary readings from a course on Shakespeare and a literary research and writing course illustrated how perspectives from cultural studies might help to broaden and diversify critical discussion in a wide variety of courses. Issues of race, class, and gender are relevant to discussions of Shakespeare or the British novel; multiculturalism can inform all courses, not just those on ethnic literatures. The emphasis in these discussions was on bringing multicultural perspectives to all English courses, rather than on requiring students to take particular courses.

2. Assessment

The department had adopted an assessment plan for its major program that involved reading student essays and administering the ETS Major Field Test. Both parts of the proposed assessment plan were put into practice in 2001-2002. In the winter, a group of faculty met on a Saturday and scored a sample of student essays according to a rubric they had developed earlier. The essays were written for the Shakespeare and the historical survey courses, and had been chosen by instructors to represent a range of student work in these courses central to the major. On the whole, students seemed to have mastered the skills of critical and historical analysis the major aims for; however, a number of papers received scores of “1” and “2,” suggesting the need for further work on these analytic skills. The ETS Major Field Test, given to seniors in the fall and winter capstone sections, produced more discouraging results, with many students scoring below
the national mean. A full account of both assessment processes appears in the department’s assessment report, submitted in April and now available on the TLA Web site.

The results of the ETS examination were not available in time for the department’s early curricular discussions and so were not addressed in the proposals for the major program submitted in February. In the coming year, the department’s Undergraduate Studies committee will decide on a follow-up to the assessment process: whether to continue with the ETS examination or to rely on the more locally normed assessment based on student essays. Future proposals for curricular change will obviously need to address the results of the 2001-02 assessment, even while the department identifies new areas for assessment.

3. Advising

Last year, the department planned to develop a brochure for majors and a resource center of materials on graduate programs, scholarship opportunities, and career options. As the PeopleSoft system continues to roll out, and the university establishes an Academic Resource Center, some of the department’s goals for advising have been met or modified; we are getting better information about our majors and are able to update it more often. We await word on the University’s efforts to track alumni, an important source of information about advising.

In place of a printed brochure on the major and related subjects, the department is developing an online “handbook” that will eventually be linked to the department’s home page and will allow students to select the particular topic they need information on—whether major requirements, advice on writing papers, or how to request letters of recommendation. A draft of the handbook is nearly complete, and we hope it will be available by the end of this year. We may not require funds for printing the guide to the major, after all. On the other hand, we may need to hire a student with web-management skills to post and maintain the online handbook.

Although the university’s Academic Resource Center and its Career Development Center can now provide students with a great deal of information and guidance, a resource center for students in English continues to be important. Some materials about programs and publishing in Creative Writing, together with books on career choices for majors, have been assembled; the cost to date has been minimal, and the department has not requested special funds from the College for this purpose. The issue, it turns out, is not the material but the location: at present, no central and readily accessible location for these materials exists, and student access to them is therefore a problem. For graduate students, the department may make its conference room (McGaw 212) a center for information and discussion, though some issues of security remain to be settled. For the over 300 undergraduate majors, space for a resource center is harder to find, especially with the current shortage of rooms in McGaw. The department staff are working to find a temporary area for materials in the department office.
With the shift in advising methods caused by PeopleSoft, the department is planning at least one meeting to train faculty in the use of Course Histories and Degree Progress Reports in advising students.

4. Issues on which there is Joint Agreement to Continue Working

- Faculty Diversity. Last April the department chair attended a national meeting on hiring and retaining faculty of color. Some strategies learned at that meeting are being implemented by the department in this year’s search process. The department remains committed to hiring and retaining faculty of color, and to diversity in its curriculum.

- Use of Recently Hired Faculty. Some of the curricular proposals discussed above were generated by the faculty in writing, and it is likely that their involvement in the undergraduate curriculum will increase in the coming year. Similarly, new courses by faculty of color continue to appear in the department’s offerings: this year, department faculty will offer a course on the literature of “Land and Labor in Indigenous America” and a course on Asian-American literature, in addition to the several standard offerings in ethnic literatures.

- Student Data. The department’s secretary, James Phelps, has been instrumental in gathering and ordering student data from the PeopleSoft databases; OIPR has also provided information on enrollment patterns that will be helpful in future curricular discussions. We look forward to more readily available information about students and their programs in the future.