

Report by Graduate Students for the Academic Review of the English Department*

A Report by the GPSS and English Students
May 31, 2001

On April 12, 2001, GPSS met with graduate students in the English department to discuss their opinions about the graduate program. Over twenty students participated in the discussion. Surveys about various areas of concern were distributed and taken up at the meeting, while written responses were also solicited through a departmental e-mail list. Students from all of the different degree programs (including MFA, MA/PhD, and MATESOL) attended and were positive about many aspects of the department. Most were pleased with recent efforts on the part of both the department and graduate students to address issues of governance, mentoring, curriculum and professional development. Students identified ways in which efforts in these areas should be augmented. Students also identified other more neglected areas that should be improved to promote a better graduate education as well as a stronger departmental culture. These included communication/community, technology and diversity. In addition, two areas of deep concern to students emerged: faculty retention and graduate student funding. The state of these two areas, while admittedly not fully within the control of the department, nevertheless bode ominously for the department. While most students did not want to suggest the sky was falling, it was clear that clouds are forming and not a few students have gotten wet. This report will cover all the areas listed above, but will start by elaborating on these last two concerns.

Faculty Retention

It is an open secret that the English Department has had difficulty retaining faculty. Even worse for the department is that many who have left were recent hires and thus represented the future of the program. Such academic free agency is the mark of a successful humanities program, but it appears that the English department is more often the victim than the victor in this somewhat unseemly process. There have been some positive lateral hires made by the department, but not enough to recoup recent losses. It also seems also that there is a tendency to replace senior faculty--both who have retired or have been hired away--with assistant professors. This strategy might have paid off if the faculty had stayed long enough to develop reputations, but often they, too, have been hired away. Some students are in the position of having the entire committee they took their exams with leave the department. There have been provisions made so that some can finish dissertations with faculty now outside the department, but this situation has had deleterious effects on the morale of many students.

Two subject areas were singled out as hardest hit in the open forum: American studies and Creative Writing. American studies has lost both senior faculty and promising assistant professors to other institutions. At one time, this specialization could legitimately be said to have one of the strongest in the program, but nearly half of those faculty are gone. Creative Writing, on the other hand, has not had a problem with faculty retention so much as the amount of active faculty. The program is advertised as having 5 poets and 5 fiction writers but, in part because the accomplishments of its members, each program has only three faculty members available to students. Since the MFA

* The graduate program in English actually consists of 5 degree programs, including a terminal MA program, an MA/PhD program, an MFA program, a MATESOL (Master of Teaching English as a Second Language), and a MAT program. Students pursuing the MFA and the MATESOL degrees generally work with different faculty and curriculum than those in the literature programs.

program (officially) lasts only two years and is focused around workshops, this is quite a problem: students may have trouble getting required courses or forming a committee for their thesis. Students wondered why faculty who go on-leave are not replaced or why the program does not use more visiting faculty or lecturers. Students also worry that, given how few faculty there are in creative writing to begin with, there is not enough pull within the department for the program to make additional hires.

These two specialties were well represented at the Open Forum, but their concerns were echoed by almost all students who commented on the program. Other students lamented the loss of specialists in post-colonial and minority literatures. A number of students said that they could no longer recommend their programs to prospective applicants. Although both the literature and creative writing programs have in the past been rated exceptionally high for public institutions, the current losses have certainly put their reputations in jeopardy.

Funding

The most common way for graduate students in English to pay for their education is to teach 100-level and 200-level classes in English. It is well known that graduate students in the English department, while called Teaching Assistants, effectively teach their own classes with fairly close supervision in their first year that diminishes as they continue. One result of faculty attrition has been that students could often expect to teach one, two or even three years past their last year of guaranteed funding, and a generous number of Assistant Instructorships have been available to those who finish their PhDs. While students welcome teaching as a great opportunity, they also find that the amount of work required to teach the labor intensive lower division courses can create problems for those trying to complete exams and dissertations, often prolonging time to degree by one or more years.

Currently, there exist no yearlong fellowships specifically for graduate students in English. (There is one, university-wide, interdisciplinary fellowship, as well as a fellowship for a year at Cambridge. Both of these are regularly won by graduate students in English.) The department awards three one-quarter fellowships annually and students in English are regularly awarded one-quarter fellowships from the Graduate school. This paucity stands in contrast to the two or three recruitment fellowships solely for students in English, which last a full year and are given to incoming graduate students at the MA and post-MA level. They are not given, as one student pointed out, to students who finish their MA at the UW. Many students felt that it was inappropriate to be so generous with recruitment money when it could be better spent supporting degree completion by students already in the program. Students pointed out that it is not those who are recruited who make a reputation for a department, but rather those who finish and go elsewhere. Some also felt that, given the job crunch, it was almost unethical for the department to offer so much more money to start the degree than to finish it.

The structure of how funding is dispersed is perceived as ambiguous by many students. Some students who arrived without funding understood that it was guaranteed to those who made it to the second year. This is not the case. In the MFA program, only two students in fiction and two students in poetry are given TAs each year; this means that only 1/10 of the students in the MFA program are funded. Some MFA students thought that if funding wasn't going to be increased, it should at least be more equitably spread among students. Students in both programs felt it might be better not to fund incoming students—at least with TAs—but instead guarantee funding for the second year and beyond. Students would also appreciate the department being clearer both about the how funding for extra years is decided, as well as whether it is available or not. The department regularly awards funding as late as August. In some ways, this is a reflection of how funding for classes is distributed at a university level, but this lottery like situation detracts from the laudable goal

of giving students support to finish. Students commented that it also seemed unfair that for the most part RA positions are reserved for those with at least year of funding left (despite the fact that there are cases of students supported beyond their sixth year by such positions). Since such positions allow students a more regular schedule than a TA, they are ideal for those who are completing their dissertation. Students shouldn't have to choose between getting teaching experience and finishing a dissertation.

Overall, departmental communication about how and why intra-departmental graduate student funding is allocated as it is needs significant improvement. And while the department has made some good efforts in publicizing various extra-departmental means of funding a graduate education in English, it was felt that more work could also be done in this area. Ultimately, for University of Washington students to remain competitive (and the department), more research and dissertation fellowships will have to be created.

Other Issues

The above are the issues that concerned nearly all graduate students, so we wanted to highlight them in this report. However, the conversation ranged fairly widely over a number of other issues. We should add also that since there is an active Graduate Student Organization in the department, conversations like this are routine. We have drawn on insights from monthly meetings of the organization and from an e-mail list associated with it to make this report.

Professional Development

The department has begun to move towards training students to perform as faculty as well as students. It's been said that UW graduates are relatively articulate about teaching issues and are broadly trained as teachers. For some time, students who are given a TA must attend a training session for two weeks before their first class as well participate in a seminar on pedagogy (concurrent with the first quarter teaching). The training session remains unpaid, although it lasts from 8-5 for seven working days. And while initial training is good, students do feel that support drops away for those teaching 200-level classes. There have been some attempts at mentoring, but they have been haphazard and unfocused. Students are concerned that efforts this past year towards more in-depth mentoring for 200-level students are the result of individual faculty interests rather than a movement in departmental focus and wish to see such efforts more fully institutionalized. Students are very much interested in learning more about lecturing and the teaching of literature in addition to composition pedagogy. Students applauded the recent brown bag teaching colloquia, which are starting to address these concerns. Nevertheless, students feel that these changes have come from their initiative; that faculty have been reactive rather proactive, in part because training teachers is not widely perceived as helping one advance professionally. Students urge the department to support such professional development as a regular part of the graduate program—and professionally reward faculty who are so involved.

One area in which the department does quite well is in support for students ready to go on the market. A very active job placement committee critiques letters of application, reviews career files, and provides forums on the MLA interview process, among other things. Students hope the department will continue to build on this useful part of the program. In particular, they want to see more seminars on publishing, since it is almost a requirement now to have published to be hired.

Curriculum

Students appreciate the flexibility of the department's curriculum, but lament that the fact that, since faculty are not required to teach anything in particular, sometimes offerings for a given quarter are peculiar. One student recalled a quarter when there were 3 graduate seminars on the American Fifties, which was many as the total number of English Renaissance seminars for that year. There is some sentiment favoring a required class for all students, including MFAs, which would effectively

introduce students to problems in literary study and literary theory. One student recalled that a few years earlier a proposal for a new and improved "research methods" class had been made, resulting in a class taught by the English selector for the library. Some PhD students thought there should be classes specifically for those who had completed exams, as is the case at other institutions: these classes--perhaps structured solely around people presenting research--could extend the learning experience, while providing an incentive to get writing done. Students were aware that other graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences at the UW had begun to offer such classes. It has been often commented that writing a dissertation in the department is needlessly solitary and, though student-formed writing groups often do emerge, more could be done to support the process. Some MFAs expressed disappointment with *all* the literature offerings in the program, including those taught by creative writing faculty: they felt that a class should be taught on recent poetry and fiction, as is currently not the case.

In a concern related to the points about faculty retention, one student noted that the department relies heavily on "adjunctivitis" in coverage. Often faculty listed as doing ethnic studies, women studies, and/or cultural studies hold appointments in other programs. The result is often oversubscribed classes and difficulty in getting faculty directors for dissertations in these areas of interest. It was pointed out that there are fields in the department that are not similarly impacted and suggested that the department should make some attempt in recruiting students with interests in a ratio similar to its strengths. Clearly identifying departmental strengths in brochures would help prospective students in choosing UW (or not) as an program appropriate to their interests. And, in a related issues, while the large size of the department means that many students never venture outside English offerings in their coursework, nor feel the need to, an increase in interdisciplinary research in recent years suggests that the department may want to address directly questions of interdisciplinarity and consider ways to better publicize to students their options in interdisciplinary work—particularly as it applies to coursework and committee composition.

The tradition of student run colloquia for the various specializations was pointed out as a significant strength in the program. Two of these colloquia have put on graduate conferences that have drawn participants from all over the US. While realizing there is a tacit agreement between faculty and students that these colloquia are primarily run by students, some students wondered if the department could do more to support or cultivate these colloquia. Contacting the colloquia still tends to depend on word of mouth; at a minimum, the department could make an effort to identify and publicize these opportunities.

Students were also impressed with the new exam system, which addressed concerns about timing (the old system involved taking 3 written tests and 1 oral in 3 months, while the new process takes only one weekend and a follow-up oral exam) and relevance (the new system allows for more pedagogical questions and makes the oral exam explicitly linked to the dissertation). Since this was an issue of concern for many students in the past, its resolution is a notable success for the department as a whole. Some students feel that the mechanics of the process has still not yet taken into account the possibilities of new technology. It is still the case that students must arrive early on campus to get questions and then return home to write them, rather than receiving them by e-mail.

Technology

Students feel a lack of technological support particularly for Teaching Assistants, but also for all students in the department. A fairly substantial blow was the recent restriction of the computing lab in Communications to Math students. TAs had come to rely on the free printing available at this lab because there are few, if any, printers in Padelford available to graduate students. There are a few free printers for teachers available across campus, but their hours are restricted and their locations not publicized. Computers in general are at a premium in the English Department. Most but not all TAs have a computer, all of which are PCs. Problems with computers often take months to fix

because there is only one staff person servicing computers for the entire department as well as the computer-equipped English classes. There was once a lab (with inadequate printers) available to all students in English, but it is no longer functional and the room is possibly slated to be an office for TAs. Students did make a successful proposal to the UW Student Technology Fee Committee to fund two laptops, while the department is working out a way for TAs to print assignments with a departmental laser printer. (Plans for more ambitious proposal to the Technology Fee always founder on the lack of space in Padelford.) That there is no lab identified lab for students of the humanities, whether graduate or undergraduate, increases the sense that such students are poor relations at the university.

In conjunction with the new Textual Studies Program, the department has begun to offer courses specializing in Hypertext and other questions of electronic mediums. Also, the new Mary Gates Center classrooms equipped with current computer and presentation technology have advanced options for TAs and faculty choosing to explore the use of newer technology in teaching. Nevertheless, few TAs choose to try this option for teaching and there appears to be little departmental drive to include teaching with newer technologies as part of the standard teaching training and practice. As in many areas, student feel departmental goals in the study of and teaching with technology should be clarified. Though most students still choose to teach in a traditional, low-tech environment and only a fraction of students have yet taken courses related to electronic textual media, with the pace of technology in the classroom and distance learning becoming a more common educational practice, it might behoove the department and its graduate students to shape departmental goals in this area much more consciously.

Governance

Three years ago, graduate students requested and got representation on all committees in the department except for the Executive Committee. This change illustrated both the students' ability to collaborate as well as the department's willingness to listen. Some students feel that graduate students should have more input in the hiring of new faculty. Currently, that input is asked for only informally, though it is regularly requested. Some students also thought that faculty meetings should be more publicized and students should be asked attend or at least represented. Overall, however, most students are impressed by how readily the department has begun to seek their input.

Diversity

When asked to comment on diversity in the department, several students laughed and one commented, "What diversity?" More than one student could enumerate the exact number of minority students and faculty in the department (generally on one hand). The department is widely perceived by students as being a mostly white, heterosexual program. While students assume the Department follows the University (and State) non-discrimination policy in hiring faculty and accepting students, they were otherwise unclear on the department's specific goals and efforts in regards to diversity of faculty, staff and student bodies, OR in programmatic specializations related to diversity. Students felt having a clear and well publicized (again the question of communication) diversity plan for the department would help in recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty. Several students commented on the dearth of faculty to serve on committees of students specializing in marginalized literatures. (This problem harkens back to the issue of adjunctivitis, as it often is the case that students studying marginalized peoples and literatures will look to Ethnic Studies, History, and other programs for faculty support).

Community/Communication

Community is the last point we will address, but it seems to underlie many of the concerns that students have, especially if the subject is broadened to include communication. It is often perceived

that the English department replicates a problem at the UW (and at many other research institutions): students can often feel adrift and at the mercy of anonymous bureaucracy. Though the need for a "rough guide" for graduate study in English impelled students to organize 3 years ago, students still rely heavily on the graduate secretary for how to move through the program. She is a fount of knowledge, but many students still think the department should be more open about its procedures. Students recommended having an up-to-date electronic or paper brochure detailing respective student, staff, and adviser responsibilities in regards to specific procedures and timelines toward graduate degrees. Similarly publicized guidelines for departmental TA and fellowship funding applications as well as clearly outlined departmental procedures (including customary timelines) and criteria for funding would likely alleviate much of the confusion and accompanying frustration students have expressed.

It was also observed at the open forum that orientation for new students is cursory compared to the amount of time given to new TAs. This, along with separating TA and non-TA mailboxes, insinuates hierarchies in the program. And since students rarely gather outside of classes except as TAs, that hierarchy persists. In general, students think that there should be more departmental-wide functions. These could consist in more receptions for faculty, students and staff. Students also think that a regular departmental seminar, where students and faculty present current research (perhaps along the lines of the on again off again "works in progress" events put on by MFA faculty) would make the department seem less daunting, while creating the possibility for more collaboration. This departmental seminar could be an interesting version of the "research methods" class in which all students, to some degree or another, expressed interest.

Graduate students in English three years ago created a departmental organization (the English GSO), which has become a vehicle for funneling information to and from the department. This organization has helped develop a stronger and more focused graduate student community, particularly among literature students. The GSO is currently working to better involve students from the other degree programs (MFA and MATESL) and recent increased participation in elections by students in these programs show that significant progress is being made. The GSO has enabled students to be more focused in their efforts to work with the department and as a result the department has usually been more than willing to accommodate and include graduate students in its internal discussions. With input from all constituencies in the department many of the areas listed in this report have been improved.

Conclusions

These conclusions are a distillation of the remarks above and meant to highlight what has already been said. They represent challenges for the department; the successes have already been alluded to above. Graduate students in English take seriously the idea that a program review can be a catalyst for change in an academic program. The department has demonstrated flexibility and creativity in dealing with student concerns already. Graduate students also hope that one ingredient missing in this equation in the past--funding--will become more available through this process. With that in mind, here are the areas that students most want the department to work on these areas and are willing to make the effort to collaborate where it is possible:

- Retaining faculty crucial to making graduate experience relatively stable
- Creating funding opportunities for research and dissertation work
- Creating mentoring and training for students teaching at the 200 level
- Developing a greater sense of departmental community
- Developing better strategies for communication of departmental goals and procedures, particularly in the areas of diversity, funding, technology and degree program procedures