

English Department Response to Department Review Report (October 29, 2009)

We would like to begin by acknowledging our appreciation for the considerable time devoted to our department review by the members of the Review Committee and by David Canfield-Budde in the Graduate School. We are grateful for the careful attention they accorded our self-study and for the obvious care they put into both the site visit and the report itself—in particular, their recognition of the significant time and effort that we have as a Department devoted to this review process. It is gratifying to read their assessment that, “This is a department that has learned how to tackle issues of the utmost intellectual and practical consequence and to move through well-organized deliberation to thoughtful action.” We likewise appreciate their recognition of our progress since the time of our last review and of our departmental strengths, as well as their frank evaluation of areas to which we should continue to attend. While we do not yet have all the answers, we think that we have succeeded in identifying the most crucial questions for our immediate future and, with the Review Committee’s help, in further refining those questions.

Among the areas the report found to praise, we would like to underscore several that will be especially critical as we move forward. These include: 1) the Department’s commitment to its ongoing process of self-definition and collective decision-making, 2) the steps we have made toward more effective integration of our internal subunits, 3) the training and mentoring provided to our TAs, and their resulting pedagogical confidence, 4) various areas of faculty/programmatic strengths (a “superlative” creative writing faculty; a “strong and coherent” language/rhetoric faculty; a “strong” MATESOL program; a “venerable and nationally known” Interdisciplinary Writing Program; the “impressive Literature and Culture faculty,” 5) our recent undergraduate program curricular innovations, 6) the effectively complementary roles of the Expository and Interdisciplinary Writing Programs, 7) our Department’s “impressive public and community presence” and, central to all of these other strengths, 8) our “terrific” and “highly professional” staff.

The context for this departmental response is inevitably the considerably changed institutional situation since the time our review process began. Foremost here is the budget crisis, which fell just short of having devastating consequences for this department (like many others on campus). We had to cancel two faculty searches (both fortunately reapproved this year); we had to close our highly praised department writing center (amid a general vulnerability of writing support for students across the entire campus); we had to reduce staffing levels in all of our department offices; lecturers saw their terms of employment significantly reduced; we lost considerable flexibility in resource allocation and innovation due to the sharp decline in endowment income; and we lost over 20% of our permanently allocated TA/AI instructional resources. Indirect effects of the cuts include a sharp reduction in the number of incoming MA/PhD students in 2009 (about half of a usual year’s class) and significant redirection of teaching resources (near-elimination this year of senior seminars, a deep reduction in graduate course offerings). The effects of these cuts have been masked for this year, due largely to the unusually high amount of temporary funding that the Provost provided to the College, but next year looms in front of us as we begin fall quarter.

We would, however, also signal some important successes. We continue to have our lecturers move through the ranks toward promotion, with two being promoted to senior lecturer and one to principal lecturer last year. We survived the budget cuts with a much smaller loss of student slots than might have been anticipated (mostly because enrollment is very heavy in virtually every class being offered this fall: the number of unfilled slots in 200-400 level classes fell from 13.8% in Autumn 2008 to 5.5% in Autumn 2009; the percentage of unfilled slots in EWP classes fell from 3% to 2%, with 135 fewer students enrolled and 7 fewer sections offered; the percentage of unfilled slots in IWP classes fell from 11% to 6%, with 9 fewer students and 3 fewer sections), while *total* 200-400 level enrollment fell by only 16 students and *total* 100-level enrollment by only 144). We managed to continue to support all the graduate students to whom we had commitments for multi-year support. We had one additional faculty member receive a MacArthur Award (Heather McHugh joining a group that now numbers four), and an emeritus faculty member receive his second Washington State Book Award (David Wagoner). We have a number of books forthcoming over the next year, including two manuscripts from assistant professors accepted at Cambridge University Press. We managed to continue our curricular innovation, with a second faculty course development group working together during the past year. We had both a faculty member (John Webster) and a graduate student (Ed Chang) receive University Distinguished Teaching Awards.

In many ways, the most useful portion of the department review report was its focus upon particular areas that the review committee thought would benefit from ongoing or renewed attention. In this area we would highlight: 1) departmental coherence, 2) faculty workload, 3) graduate program issues, 4) continued progress on undergraduate curricular coherence, and 5) possible over-commitment of faculty time to extra-departmental service. We will address each of these areas below.

Faculty

An ongoing objective for the Department as a whole is the timely promotion of all faculty members. This fall, we again have two senior lecturers up for reappointment and one senior lecturer up for promotion to principal lecturer. Next fall, we might have anywhere from one to three tenure cases and anywhere from two to six promotions to full professor—a hefty service load for faculty to be handling next summer. A lingering problem is the shortening of reappointment terms for lecturers; the two senior lecturers with renewed appointments starting this fall saw their terms reduced to two years (from the usual five). Even as we understand the College's reasons for making this decision last year, we advocate strongly that normal practice be resumed for these meritorious colleagues whose work is essential to the Department, and that the College also commit to "catching up" those lecturers reappointed last year.

Over the next several years, nothing is likely to be more important for the Department than continued success in tenure cases and the steady movement of associate professors to full professor, for we have a strong cohort of both assistant and associate professors with several years in rank. For their benefit and for our collective benefit, we need to insure that we create conditions to support them in their continuing academic progress and that we review their cases for promotion in thorough, helpful and timely ways.

In any department the size of ours, which sees the regular retirement or departure of 2-4 faculty members per year, it is crucial to have a steady and predictable flow of new positions. We don't expect ever to catch up to the heights reached in the 1970's and 1980's, but we remain seriously worried in the current budget climate about maintaining even our current numbers. The two positions that were approved this year are invaluable and much appreciated, but we would note that these two new hires, even if both arrive next fall, will still represent a net loss of at least one faculty member, and very likely three to four faculty members, compared to the number of retirements and departures over the 2008-10 period. As the review report recommended, we intend to pursue our already established hiring plan, with adjustments as needed due to subsequent departures. Thus, our Creative Writing Program faces the prospect of losing two faculty members at the same time, with the retirement of Charles Johnson effective in summer 2009 and Heather McHugh available to teach less as a consequence of the five-year MacArthur Foundation Award she received this fall. Hence we will take very seriously the report recommendation (16) that a faculty line in creative non-fiction be added to the Creative Writing program. College support for continued hiring (and ultimately, of course, Provost-level support for this objective) is essential.

Lastly, we agree with the report's assessment that the work of "some scholars--most notably those in Language and Rhetoric, EWP, CWP and IWP—is undervalued" (7)—not by the world at large, the Review Committee seems to be saying, but sometimes, in quite visible ways, within the Department itself or within the College or University. It is worth underscoring that the work of faculty in these areas is often multiplex, different less in the range of activities it can embrace than in the particular balancing required by faculty who may have administrative or public roles as an inherent part of their professional lives. Indeed, there is a potential synergy among creative, scholarly, pedagogical and service roles in these areas that can be particularly fruitful, and that many of these faculty are already successfully exploiting. Thus, for example, we should note that Language and Rhetoric faculty are a group of scholars and publishers as active as any in the Department. Some of that research is related to their applied work, but much of it is not; some of it relates specifically to writing or language acquisition in very practical ways, but much of it ranges into other areas as well, areas that often connect closely to work done by faculty members in other fields.

Workload/Teaching Equity

Among the areas most affected by last year's budget crisis, faculty and staff workloads and the overall allocation of departmental resources have been the most profoundly reshaped. Workload within the English Department has at least two primary aspects, one internal, the other external. Internally, the Review Committee noted with approval our progress toward equity and transparency in this area. As the review report noted, the Department relies "to a significantly lesser degree" on course releases to compensate for administrative work, PhD supervision and negotiated counteroffers. But as the report also noted, this is not simply a departmental matter, but is related as well to extra-departmental commitments, most notably (but not solely) with regard to College and University writing programs. Thus, one clear recommendation of the report is: "The Committee believes that the Department, supported by the College, may need to pull back on some of its service work for the sake of research—including research on pedagogy and writing. The College, which reaps the benefits of this service, may perceive little incentive

to correct it; nonetheless, it must” (18). That said, we would note that we as a department welcome this service work and are committed to it as part of our intellectual identity, but we do need adequate resources, in part from outside the Department, to be able to perform it in ways that balance the service and research.

Discussions about workload will thus need to proceed on several different levels if there are to be long-term solutions that benefit faculty members, the Department and the College alike. Among problems hard to resolve is the standard mode across the entire university of replacement for faculty time. Faculty members are typically bought out of departmental duties at the rate of a TA or AI replacement salary...with the net effect for a department such as ours, with its heavy service responsibilities, being an ongoing transfer of teaching responsibilities to graduate students and temporary post-doctoral instructors, as well as a persistent difficulty in covering with permanent faculty members a number of courses across our curriculum that we would prefer to have those faculty teach. A second, separate issue is the imbalance within the Department itself of graduate student supervision, a topic that we now (after the self-study) have the ability to address more directly. A third is the distribution of student FTE across varying kinds of courses. A fourth is the frequently shifting and difficult-to-assess commitment of faculty time to extra-departmental service.

Faced with the situation of having fewer instructional resources and at least as many students to teach, and operating with an eye to what is certain to be a lower permanent budget than we had during the 2007-09 biennium, we have already made some significant changes: 1) altering enrollment policies in order to keep students from repeating essentially similar composition classes (thus reducing the total number of sections we need to cover), 2) working with the Honors College to seek additional efficiencies in writing instruction for their students, 3) eliminating (at least for now) our senior seminar requirement for English majors (thus decreasing the number of smaller enrollment classes we can offer them), 4) decreasing significantly the number of graduate seminars. The overall effects of these and other changes will be summarized in a Report on Enrollment Patterns for Autumn Quarter 2009 that we will be sending to the College later this quarter. Ongoing monitoring of these and similar changes is essential if we are to make sure that efficiencies imposed by budgetary constraints do not produce unacceptable decreases in the quality of educational services.

Graduate Programs

Budget cuts are significantly affecting all of our graduate programs, resulting in severely diminished permanent TA funding and reductions across the board in available TAs for all of those programs. For MATESOL, where TAs teach in the UWEO English Language Programs, we will be losing two TAs as part of a renegotiated agreement concerning our joint faculty hire with them, reapproved for this year. MA/Phd and MFA slots were reduced proportionately across our current allocation at a level of about 20% with regard to anticipated permanent funding. The impact of this change upon the size of our graduate programs and our graduate admissions policies will be a key topic for discussion this year, and likely for several years to come.

The review identified several specific areas that it believes the Department should address concerning graduate education. We believe that its advice can be summarized simply: the graduate programs, especially the MA/PhD program, could benefit from greater coherence, consistency, and transparency. So our primary departmental focus for the current year will be a full-fledged review of our MA/PhD programs, dealing with policies about exams, dissertations, MA essays, support, admission and other issues. We have scheduled a Department retreat for January 22, 2010, where we intend to discuss initial recommendations in all of these areas.

First, the review strongly recommended the completion of a new Graduate Handbook. This task is underway. Building on work from previous years, we are assembling and harmonizing a range of documents to create a streamlined, Web-accessible Practical Guide to the Graduate Degree Programs. The new Director of Graduate Studies, Brian Reed, is also in the process of completing a draft of a new Graduate Handbook. With regard to the MA/PhD program, there are a number of ambiguities that have arisen that will require faculty votes to settle. In addition, after meeting with a group of students at the dissertation-writing phase, we have also discovered that current faculty practice diverges from the letter and spirit of some program requirements, at least as originally worded and implemented. At our Department retreat, a major goal will therefore be reaching consensus about how and when we assess student progress.

Second, the review expressed reservations about the MA/PhD program's admissions process. While examining this in its entirety, the Graduate Office is working particularly closely with the Language and Rhetoric faculty to resolve past troubles. They will likely have an opportunity to review and rank applicants in their areas, information that the Graduate Studies Committee will then take into account when making its final determinations.

Third, the review inquired whether the Department's job placement rate is as strong overall as it should be. Given the current disastrous academic job market, we in fact believe that our graduates are highly competitive for available positions, and we would underscore that the rate of placement of our PhD graduates continues to be very high. But we take this point very seriously and will continue to pursue programmatic changes designed to make our students as competitive as possible. In addition to a Preparing Future Faculty program that has been in place since 1994, the Placement Committee in Spring 2009 launched a new job preparation institute that was well attended and will be repeated annually. It is possible, however, that in pinpointing placement as a problem the review is talking less about the job market per se—the application materials, the interviews, the campus visits—than our students' academic preparation more generally. We believe that greater programmatic coherence is the first step toward improvement in this area. Hence we are exploring possible curricular changes that would clarify for students and faculty when and how professionalization and skill acquisition should take place. The January retreat will serve as a venue to spread this conversation to the entire Department. At the same time, we intend to continue to take professional preparation in the broadest sense and to pursue our efforts to increase our students' awareness of and access to a wider range of professional careers; not all of them will wind up in tenure-line faculty positions, nor do all of them wish to do so. Success in this area needs to be measured in careful and nuanced ways.

The last point that the review mentions—difficulty recruiting the top students in the applicant pool—will likely remain a problem for now, since we simply cannot promise the same level and

consistency of support and funding as many of our peer institutions around the country. We do hope, however, that the planned improvements to the graduate program—along with the continued adherence to the multi-year departmental hiring plan—will make its strengths, diversity, and flexibility more visible and thus more attractive to prospective students.

Even in areas the Review Committee praised, such as training and mentoring of teaching assistants, we continue to search for innovations and improvements. This fall, for instance, we significantly upgraded the training of English Department TAs teaching IWP writing classes linked to the English major gateway course. The Department provided temporary funding with which to lengthen the 2009 fall workshop for the nine TAs involved, so their initial experience of the IWP purpose-driven approach to teaching writing was clearer and more fully developed. The extra funding also supports their participation in a series of brief, targeted assessment activities during the year. These will help us gauge the impact of training on our TAs' teaching in gateway links, and also, we hope, on the roles that TAs see for writing when they teach future literature and culture courses. This new orientation continues a process that began when IWP faculty helped formulate the Department's original gateway plan, and helps maximize the participation of IWP faculty in it as writing link teachers and TA team leaders. One indirect result of this process is that IWP work is now familiar to and better understood by more members of the Department.

A broader effort to strengthen TA training here at the UW is also in the planning stages, one of the ways we hope to further integrate IWP work with the teaching aims of other departments. We expect, with assistance from the Dean's office, to choose a department with which to pilot several new kinds of connection, looking toward the day when improved budgets make possible some basic changes in IWP faculty roles.

Undergraduate Programs

We likewise have a new Director of Undergraduate Programs as of this fall. Gillian Harkins will be continuing the ongoing review of our undergraduate major, with the focus now shifting from our gateway courses (202/197 and 302) to the 300-level major requirements and the 400-level offerings (at a moment when we initially had to cancel most senior seminars to maintain enrollment availability after last year's budget cuts). At the end of last year, faculty voted to make several changes in the major, all designed to strengthen the coherence of the overall curriculum and to guide students more effectively through their studies. We have requested approval to renumber our gateway lecture course as 301/297 (currently 202/197) as a way to better signal to students the pedagogical expectations for the course and its place in their program of study. We are also requesting that students be required to obtain 2.0 grades in each of the gateway courses in order to proceed through the major.

The new 200-level course outcomes, which we continue to fine tune, are a good example of productive departmental interdependence, with EWP-developed outcomes modeling the use of outcomes assessment that are now being adapted and applied in the major. The 202/197 gateway continues to be a rich site of departmental conversation about what we as an English Department do and how we see our various areas of study interconnecting. Starting this year, we intend also to look toward making our undergraduate curriculum more inclusive and more effective for

students by examining possibilities for an undergraduate language and rhetoric emphasis and the creation of a teaching track in the major.

Writing Programs

Overall, our writing programs, including the TA orientation and mentoring they provide, received strong praise in the review, especially for being well-aligned with national understanding of best practices in these areas. One ongoing issue for our writing program faculty that was noted is translating into scholarship more of the considerable knowledge and experience they have as a result of teaching and administrative loads that often keep them from doing precisely that.

The review committee emphasized, for instance, the “scholarly potential” of IWP innovation, and recommended that program-based scholarship be more publicly expressed—that its “product value” would be “useful for promotion.” It is important to recognize that IWP faculty are lecturers, whose professional advancement explicitly does *not* depend on publication. At the same time, the committee’s emphasis on the intellectual value, as well as the pedagogical value, of IWP work is very encouraging. And despite the fact that IWP faculty are primarily *teachers* (understood here as a role that includes serving as trainers, mentors, and consultants on writing and learning across and beyond the College), and so have little time to publish, the program has influenced writing instruction in many schools around the country because it constitutes a lived example of a distinctive, powerful approach.

As of this fall, long-planned analysis of IWP teaching files has begun, an essential step toward producing a book on the teaching of linked writing courses. Current teachers of writing links with Psychology, for example, are first identifying assignments they—and others—have given as *types*. Examining instances of a type of assignment across several courses and disciplines will help make evident the deep differences that context makes. We hope that a book based on immersion of student writers in specific inquiry contexts will help spread teaching practices, here and at other universities, that strongly connect writing with participation and with the construction of meaning.

It is important, too, to note that significant research of the kind the Review Committee recommended is already being accomplished by our faculty. EWP provides indispensable professional experiences for the Assistant Directors as well as serving as a site of research for graduate students themselves—there are at least three current dissertations that are using EWP courses as their research site, as others have done in the past.

Creative Writing Program

Here, too, we have a new program director, Pimone Triplett, who is inheriting a stable situation and thus a smaller immediate agenda. The faculty members in the Creative Writing Program were pleased with the report overall for its positive assessment of their contributions. We would like to see the praise given in the report translate into greater support for Creative Writing, particularly in the area of graduate student funding that was correctly cited as being our keenest and most pressing need for this program. This support should link especially with a plan to

emphasize the need for more support for graduate students department-wide. In fact, the one disturbing aspect of the report was the way it seemed to suggest that it was Creative Writing's responsibility to obtain funds for student support, rather than suggesting that the university itself increase this support.

Department Climate/Coherence

Among the most emphatic recommendations of the Review Committee was this one: "Addressing [a lack of clarity about the Department's intellectual 'center'] appears of paramount importance in improving and sustaining the health of the department" (5). Elsewhere they suggested "a more powerful 'naming and claiming' of intellectual transversals" (4) as one way (among several) of addressing this perceived need for increased clarity about departmental vision and direction. We agree, while noting the difficulty of accomplishing this ambitious goal in a time of limited (possibly even severely limited) resource constraints, when even replacement-level hiring of faculty will be hard to maintain, and when money for new initiatives of any kind is very scarce and energies are absorbed simply in maintaining existing programs.

Our department's intellectual "Grid" remains, as a preliminary tool that we can use to begin clarifying the areas where intellectual agendas and research overlap within and across program areas. We will also use our review of the graduate program and ongoing revision of the undergraduate curriculum as part of this discussion, and the updating of our department hiring plan will likewise be important to this process. But we are well aware that this issue is central and needs to be addressed directly, likely over an extended period of time. At our most recent department meeting, therefore, faculty voted to have our Executive Committee establish an ad hoc Intellectual Agenda Committee charged with discussing these issues and bringing specific suggestions to the faculty for wider consultation. Faculty discussion there also made it clear that we might best approach this topic in a sequential way, that is, by having this ad hoc group start its work through a subcommittee that would focus specifically upon the narrower topic of intellectual directions for the literature and culture faculty, before proceeding to a department-wide discussion. The initial goal, that is, will be to explore answers to the Review Committee's question as to "why shouldn't Literature and Culture think of itself as a 'group' or 'field'?" A clearer understanding among members of this group of their shared purposes would, we think, facilitate more effective discussion across the Department as a whole of related issues, such as the negotiation of the part/whole relationships that the Review Committee rightly saw as still in process (3).

Diversity

Continued pursuit of the Department's established hiring plan will, we hope, produce significant ongoing progress with regard to the diversity of faculty, but we face real issues simply in replacing departing faculty members (Johnson, Kanno, McElroy, Chaudhary). Of equal importance is assessing and adjusting as needed the workload of faculty members who do find themselves having to play a disproportionate role in supervising students from underrepresented backgrounds. Like other workload issues in the department, a key step has been collection over the past few years of sufficient data to allow us to quantify matters such as workload inequities.

This year's approved hire in African American studies is a vital step in this area. We have been actively soliciting applicants for this position, with some visible success already in the number of responses. We have also sought to use this faculty search as an opportunity to deepen our connections with faculty in other departments working in related areas. Stephanie Smallwood from History has agreed to serve on our search committee for the later stages of the search; Sonnet Retman from American Ethnic Studies will, we hope, also be involved in a meaningful way (as she was likewise involved in a previous English Department search in African American Studies).

In addition, we intend to continue to pursue our aggressive efforts to attract applicants from underrepresented backgrounds into our graduate programs and—no less important—to help them succeed after their arrival. Meanwhile, we will be drawing upon some of this experience as we look also to diversify our undergraduate programs, both with regard to student population and curricular offerings. Several of the new courses that have emerged from our course development initiatives deal specifically with American Ethnic literatures or world English literatures and languages.

Persisting Issues

In closing, we would like to signal once again some of the most critical issues highlighted by the review process for our Department, those issues where we would benefit most from College and/or University assistance in reaching the desired goals.

- 1) Restored job security for lecturers
- 2) Steady and predictable faculty hiring
- 3) Long-term clarity about TA support levels and strategies for dealing with a significantly reduced TA allocation
- 4) Leadership development (restoration of the College Faculty Leadership Fellows Program)
- 5) Restoration of at least some of the cuts in staffing budget
- 6) Enhanced...or at least stably funded...extra-departmental support for key service components of the Department's mission

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