

May 25, 2011

Report of English Department Program Review Evaluation Team
Conducted: 2011, with on site visit April 8, 2011

Team Members:

Team Leader:	Dr. Liahna Armstrong, Central Washington University
Team Members:	Prof. Erika Daines, Weber State University Dr. Adam Johnston, Weber State University

Process:

The team reviewed individually in advance the Self-Study prepared by select members of the Department of English, along with other relevant materials from the University's various information sources, including documents sent by the Dean's office, archival materials, and information from the University website.

Following our individual study of the materials, the team convened on site at the Weber State University campus on April 8, 2011. We met for breakfast, introductions, and a tour of the building, and then spent the day interviewing stakeholders in the programs offered by the English Department. These included individual faculty, the Departmental advisor, the Chair, the Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, the various program directors, a cadre of community members who have connections with English, the support staff, the graduate program director, and select students and alumni.

We met for a second time with the Chair, and then conducted a work session where we discussed our individual and collective findings and identified a process for production of the team report in about a month's time. Dr. Armstrong agreed to draft the report, to be amended and supplemented by Prof. Daines and Dr. Johnston as necessary, before a final report is submitted to Dean Madonne Miner.

Program Strengths:

The Department of English Language and Literature at Weber State University is a vibrant, diverse, and productive department that offers a significant range of degree programs (18 undergraduate degrees, including 4 majors, 13 minors, and 1 certificate) and 3 MA degrees). It employs over 90 instructors, including tenured and tenure-track faculty, full-time "contract" faculty, and part-time adjunct instructors. It has a dedicated support staff consisting of an Office Specialist, a Secretary II, and a secretary for the Masters in English (MENG) program, as well as student employees with various support duties.

The committee recognizes significant strengths of the Department that we wish to highlight. These are as follows:

1. The Department hosts great diversity and versatility in its expertise and offerings. The program offerings are supported by the Department's affiliation with robust University and community programs designed to advance literacy, service learning, digital instruction, teacher education, continuing education, undergraduate research

opportunities, professional and technical writing across the disciplines, and other academic ventures. The production of an exceptional undergraduate creative writing journal and an outstanding interdisciplinary scholarly journal through the Department enhances the learning environment significantly. Curricular structures that seem unique to Weber State, such as the "Major with Emphasis" and the "Bachelor of Integrated Studies" enable elasticity and flexibility in the Department's program that are healthy options. English courses also fulfill a broad set of general education requirements, encompassing wide-ranging emphases and pedagogical approaches.

2. There are several programs within the Department that have enjoyed growth and increased energy. In particular, the MENG program has enlarged notably since established in 2006, and the new MA programs in TESOL and Teaching Licensure (not yet implemented) should boost Masters activity as well. The Creative Writing and Technical Writing programs provide exciting options for students. In all, the wide array of offerings and the commitment devoted to this is admirable.

3. A reorganization of the Developmental English program has been thoughtfully put into place and should sustain quality in that area. Developmental English has been relocated to the same building that houses English, symbolically and logistically enabling the two to mesh more organically. There are mixed feelings about the restriction that prohibits Developmental English from offering courses entirely online instead of the hybrid model that has been adopted.

4. Certain administrative revisions put into place by the current Chair have, for the most part, insured greater fairness towards all faculty, balancing of Departmental needs vs. individual faculty preferences, better service to students to enable them to plan their curricula and program requirements more carefully, and more widespread opportunities for faculty to experience desirable schedules and course assignments than has been the case in the past. The Chair's philosophy that the principle of rotation of courses-- where appropriate considering expertise and preparation-- should take place, has generally resulted in more equity of choice among faculty, better learning opportunities for students--who are assured of having more than one instructional perspective in a given area of the curriculum--and more intellectual versatility in academic approaches to material.

5. The English Teaching program has made significant strides in its curriculum by adding specific pedagogy courses taught by teaching experts in the English Department, rather than more general pedagogy courses in teacher education. Prior program reviews noted a tension between English teaching programs and the College of Education. While there are still issues with communication and differing priorities, most interviewed felt that the tensions and gaps between the two areas have been improved upon by these curricular changes.

6. Although adjunct faculty teach relatively few courses beyond the standard repertoire of writing courses, the impressive range of interests, background, and knowledge bases of this group is noteworthy. Among the tenured and tenure-track faculty, a similar range of preparation and focuses is evident. Since the vast majority of regular faculty are tenured and relatively senior, the adjunct staff must carry some of the responsibility for keeping the Department's academic outlook and theoretical underpinnings fresher and more cutting-edge, since they tend to be more recently out of graduate school and have fewer years in service at WSU. Adjunct faculty, coming from a wide array of backgrounds and teaching a large number of course sections, receive

some mentoring and coordination by directors in Developmental English and Composition. Overall, the faculty come across as dedicated to their work, deeply caring of students, and proud of the Department and University, which is indeed inspiring.

7. Another source of vitality in the Department is the ambience of the building that houses the program. Spacious hallways, well-lit interiors, good meeting spaces, comfortable offices, an open reception area for the Department offices (shared to good effect with the Department of Foreign Languages), and close access to the student center with its ample services and gathering spaces make daily life in the Department palatable for students and faculty alike.

8. Finally, it is more than heartening to speak with students who are completing their degrees, or who have graduated from the Department of English, both recently and farther back in time. The Committee met with a varied panel of such current and former students, and were singularly impressed with their sense of pride, accomplishment, and reverence for the Department and its faculty.

Program Challenges:

1. As with any large university entity, a number of challenges face the Department, some ongoing, some of more recent onset. Some challenges are systemic and cannot be simply resolved; others are more superficial and ephemeral, and can be addressed and rectified. Below is a list of the challenges as we, the Review Committee, see them: 1. The Departmental Self-Study that the Committee reviewed thoroughly before the on-campus was informative about the various Departmental programs, the faculty, and the course offerings. However, it was only able to offer minimal evidence of assessment data and analysis. While the discussion of Academic Advising was very thorough, other areas warranted fuller examination. For example, discussion of the Masters Program assessment plan left open the reasons for discontinuing portfolios as culminating evidence of student learning. Why are grades the only form of assessment administered; and what evidence exists for how specific outcomes are evaluated in these courses? Whatever the reasons for discontinuing portfolio evaluation, a more rigorous mode of program assessment for graduate work is needed. There are other assessment models besides portfolio review, and these should be investigated and considered. Absent such assessment structure, the program's credibility could be called into question. Similarly, when program changes are made (e.g., Developmental English courses uniting into a single, 6-credit course), it is not clear how these have been motivated and justified. Overall, we believe assessment of its programs is the Department's weakest feature. Fortunately, many in the department recognize this weakness and seem dedicate to improving upon it. We expect this to be a focus for future self-studies. The document also raises questions about the number of composition sections that tenured and tenure-track faculty teach and the size of enrollments in writing intensive (composition and creative writing) courses. It is unclear to what degree the Department has discussed and tried to resolve this problem, as there are clearly differing perspectives on it. Some light was shed by our interview with the Director of Composition, but unresolved questions remain. As noted in the Self-Study, budgetary pressures and being an open-enrollment institution account for some of this problem, and those are out of the hands of the Department.

Finally, along these lines, while the interview schedule compiled for the review team was extremely beneficial and those interviewed were more than helpful, the Committee would have preferred to have a group of rank-and-file faculty also scheduled for

interview. Most perspectives presented came from program directors or leaders, and there was a sense that the sort of work-a-day faculty point of view was missing and would be of use to hear.

2. The Department oversees a plethora of programs, dispersing 21 degrees (18 undergraduate [4 majors, 13 minors, 1 certificate] and 3 graduate. While in many senses, this intricate web of degrees and programs offers stimulating diversity of instruction and focus, it is also a heavy burden to sustain. Some faculty seem drawn in several directions at once, and are challenged to know exactly where to place their emphasis and energies. The benefits of the diverse curriculum seem to outweigh the difficulties, but a sense of weariness about having to maintain so many programs with equal attention came through in some of the faculty interviews, including the interview with the Department's main academic advisor. Individual program directors were interviewed; they are strong advocates of their respective programs, but the Committee sensed that focus on their individual areas precluded, in some respects, a more holistic, integrated approach to the Department's program. While it would be an exaggeration to say the different areas of the Department felt themselves in competition for students, resources, and faculty support, there was some indication of this tension. In sum, it seems that the Department has a number of focused areas of considerable academic quality and dynamism, but, consequently, is challenged to provide a more cohesive Departmental identity.

3. One area of concern is the MENG program. Recently created and an exciting addition to the Department's lineup, the MENG program seems essentially the creation of one individual who is very invested in its structure as is. The Committee cannot easily evaluate the program offerings for this graduate-level study, since assessment of student achievement in the program is both inadequate and too narrow. A successful graduate program requires a relatively high bar: both in the currency of faculty scholarship and in the intellectual demands and challenges placed on students. Moreover, it appears that there may be too many course offerings in a given semester, resulting in very low enrollments and cancellations. Both students and personnel report that the schedule is at times somewhat unpredictable; a smaller, more regularized set of offerings, planned ahead and advertised, would address this problem.

A related issue is the funding model for the MENG program. We are not sufficiently conversant with the way that degree is currently funded -- it appears to be a self-support unit that must generate the dollars to sustain itself, rather than a state-supported unit as is the rest of the Department (above the Developmental English program). However, the differences between the two funding models seem problematical and may force decisions that are not in the best interest of the academic side of the program. We also understand that instructors who teach in the MA program receive a pay bonus for doing so, and we wonder if this is economically feasible; usually, faculty consider it a great perk to teach in a graduate program and that perk is sufficient compensation for the privilege. This said, a commonly expressed point from several people interviewed was that it is difficult to attract faculty to teach in the Masters program. The program seems to be something of a conundrum and not until it is carefully reviewed will solutions be apparent. We worry about this both because it is important to have a high quality graduate program, but there must also be concomitant attention paid to maintaining the quality of the undergraduate program.

4. Despite the fact that the support staff are dedicated, efficient, and hard-working, sustaining a multi-faceted program like that in English must be extremely challenging with

such a small coterie of clerical people. We understand that the Department relies on good student help to assist those employed, but we cannot but believe that more professional staff is warranted for a Department with 91 faculty. Some matters are perennial stresspoints, such as budget oversight and p-card reconciliation, which is extremely time-consuming; these could be addressed by the aid of a part-time fiscal assistant who could relieve the staff of this particular burden so it can attend to other pressing needs. Others point out a need for specific expertise, such as technology support, to help boost curricular improvements.

5. Advising in the Department and at Weber State seems to function acceptably, but there are issues with the advising model. Advisers see advisees around graduation time, or when students want to change degrees. This conversation led to a discussion of the culture at Weber State in which there is no mandatory advising. While that practice is obviously imbedded in the institution's and thus the Department's history, it seems to be a matter of some concern. Students that we interviewed expressed some frustration at lack of guidance through their programs. While it may be impossible to deviate from the prevailing practice, it would be advisable for the Department to review the effectiveness and appropriateness of its advising structure; it may be that a more hands-on approach towards students as they maneuver through the program would be beneficial to students and enable more regularity and predictability of Department offerings (in other words, tighter planning can be more efficient for all concerned). This element was a theme in the interviews of the current and former students, who loved their WSU experiences for the most part, but collectively rued the absence of formal and sequenced advising. CatTracks is a good software tool that they may take advantage of, but even up-to-date data tracked on their records does not trump an in-person advising process. Most felt that mandatory advising would be beneficial.

6. A related issue is that most or all courses have *no prerequisites*. It is difficult to imagine how students can work from broader, more basic, more general subject matter to more advanced, more concentrated, and more sophisticated approaches without a pre-requisite structure. This system has been in place a long time and there is no evidence that it has been challenged, except for explicit mention of ENG 3080 by both students and faculty. Faculty identified this course as foundational, and students interviewed either acknowledged the value of having taken this course, or lamented the fact that they didn't understand completely some concepts in other coursework until after they had taken 3080. This lack of structure, when coupled with the lack of mandatory advising, makes it so that students can receive a variety of different sequences and, thus, a variety of different experiences from their degree. There may be virtues in this system (flexibility in course offerings, flexibility in students' course scheduling), but from an outside perspective, these may be at the expense of a more solid foundation for a program. A similar problem exists in the MA program.

7. Allocation of funds to programs and faculty within the department is difficult to understand. At many universities, departments maintain a number of standing committees that carry out the regular business of the Department, including some sort of senior advisory committee, a personnel committee, a scheduling committee, a committee that participates in decisions about allocation of funds, etc. Discussions with the Chair make clear that she works hard to keep people informed, to foster fairness and equity, and to spread hardship when it happens across the whole gamut. However, a number of faculty and directors felt that budget matters are not transparent, and some decision-making is done without either their full understanding or their participation. On the other hand, the nature of Weber State University's structure and systems are such

that it is difficult for even the Chair to know precisely what funds are available. There is no clear solution, given the setting in which the Department is placed.

Recommendations

1. In any Department where the vast majority of faculty are tenured, some issues arise, particularly the ability of programs to remain *au courant*, to incorporate fresh intellectual and scholarly perspectives, to create new courses and curricula that reflect cutting-edge trends in the discipline, to re-balance responsibilities among faculty, and in general to freshen and keep the program energized. Given the budget situation in general, we understand that opportunities for new hires will be limited for a good while. We encourage the Department to use what mechanisms are available to re-vitalize the program and to foster excellence. This may mean revisiting and augmenting faculty development opportunities, gradually amplifying scholarly expectations for faculty, and creating mentoring structures that enable more creative discourse between more senior and more junior faculty. If resources to conduct new hires become available, it should encourage the Department to think outside the standard paradigms (in other words, if a Renaissance literature professor retires, rather than uncritically opting to hire a new Renaissance professor, consider re-imagining the assignment, perhaps combining areas of expertise that mesh with the Department's strong interdisciplinary offerings or carve out new focuses that reflect contemporary trends in the discipline.

2. The committee feels strongly that the department needs to develop clear learning objectives and assessment plans for all its program components. Existing tools, particularly for the General Education courses and the MENG program, are too anemic. In tandem with this task, a reconsideration of focus and priorities should result in a revision of the current somewhat antiquated Department mission statement.

3. While the faculty and the chair are very dedicated and provide excellent instruction and leadership, the committee had a sense that the Department sees itself more as conglomerate of programs rather than a discrete, discipline based enterprise. We think it would behoove the Department to conduct a very focused self-examination about what it wants to make its academic mainstays. What are the best reasons for existing programs and offerings? Do these remain compelling reasons or have they become received wisdom rather than core truths? How can it incorporate these areas into a cohesive, well-thought-through program that doesn't merely reflect a set of individual predilections but an integral program? As the department considers its mission, learning goals, and assessment, questions like these could be considered as it takes a view of what the long term goals and mission of the department and its programs should be.

Concluding comments:

We, as a team, completed our task with a strong sense that the English Department at Weber State University is on the whole a productive, dedicated, and spirited enterprise. Its faculty are deeply committed to the integrity of the programs it offers and care that students are well educated and experience the joys of academic inquiry. We commend the Department for working creatively to sustain its energies, undergird its strengths, and maneuver through difficult budget times. We appreciate its diverse academic range and program options, and recognize the efforts of its faculty to keep the curriculum nimble and challenging. The suggestions we offer are meant to be supportive rather than critical, but we believe that by addressing those items, the Department can foster

greater achievement by students, more program cohesion, and a more balanced structure of undergraduate and graduate components. We thank everyone who assisted this effort.