

**Report of the Program Review Team
WCU Department of English
April 16, 2007**

OVERVIEW:

The review team for the BA and MA programs of the Department of English at Western Carolina University consisted of two external members, Dr. Peter Valenti of Fayetteville State University and Dr. Kurt Eisen of Tennessee Technological University, and one WCU faculty member, Dr. Anne Rogers of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology.

The two external reviewers arrived on the WCU campus began Sunday evening, February 25, followed Monday by a full day of meetings with many representatives of the department's faculty, including program directors and the department chair, a group of English majors and MA students, and WCU administrators responsible for the department's programs at the college and university levels.

Several weeks before the campus visit, the review team members were supplied with both digital and hard copies of the department's self-study, covering a comprehensive range of issues relevant to faculty, students, programs, resources, and assessment. The review covered the department's degree programs at the baccalaureate and master's levels, but did not specifically include its extensive Liberal Studies offerings in composition and literature.

We decided to present our findings in the three-part format detailing some of the department's key strengths and weaknesses, along with the opportunities for improvement that we see in the self-study document and during the campus visit.

I. STRENGTHS:

Faculty

The English faculty are clearly committed to the success of WCU students and programs. Although the English department is currently understaffed (see "Weaknesses" and "Opportunities"), there is a good mix of both newer and longer-term tenured and tenure-track faculty. This provides students with a rich variety of learning experiences, and gives newer faculty the benefit of the knowledge of the university system that older faculty have acquired over time.

Several faculty members have received regional and national recognition for their work in areas of creative writing and literary scholarship. Others have come to the university after establishing successful careers outside academe, which brings students in contact with those who have achieved success both inside and outside the academic arena. The students we spoke with were often aware of the specifics of these recognitions and

achievements. This knowledge had the effect of raising the credibility of the department as a whole and generating student enthusiasm and engagement in their work, confident that similar achievement could bring recognition. In general, the qualifications and achievements listed on faculty cv's compares very well with those of faculty at universities with a more research-centered mission.

In our meeting with students, we found that faculty members are accessible when needed, either in face-to-face contact or via e-mail or telephone. All the students spoke highly of their experiences in the WCU English programs, and the support they have received from faculty. This supportive environment is reflected in the high retention rate of undergraduate students, and the success of graduate students when they leave the program.

Programs and Events

The department should be commended for creating and sustaining a versatile array of programs at the undergraduate and graduate level despite modest resources. The new Motion Picture Studies program (supported by a recent hire in the discipline) demonstrates the department's desire to move into new areas while maintaining traditional areas of study. Recruiting of new majors at the undergraduate level has resulted in approximately three hundred majors. Faculty go to area high schools and participate in on-campus open house activities to promote the program. The department supports a web site that provides information about alumni, and describes career choices available to graduates.

The department has the largest number of undergraduate students in the College of Arts and Sciences, and retention of majors is very high. This supports an important university initiative. The department offers a strong graduate program, with approximately fifty students enrolled. About one-third of those who complete the MA go on to PhD granting institutions, while others are teaching at community colleges.

The ability of the department to offer relatively small classes at all levels is in keeping with the university's commitment to restrict large class size whenever possible. The limited number of full-time faculty members sometimes makes this difficult for upper-level classes, but in general the department has been able to meet this goal.

The department also reaches many students not enrolled in its major and minor programs. While most incoming students will take two semesters of freshman level English classes, there are also numerous upper-level perspective courses offered by the department. Each WCU student is required to take one upper level perspective class outside his or her major, and the English faculty have been especially active in offering courses that are appealing to students in other majors. The requirement that all English literature majors either take a course in professional writing or complete an internship seems a very prudent way of assuring that BA graduates are prepared for the professional world.

The department sponsors an annual literary festival each spring that brings nationally and regionally recognized authors to the WCU campus. This well-attended event exposes many students within and outside the English department to these authors, while serving to publicize the department and campus to the surrounding community and the broader region.

The department has the support of the current Dean of Arts and Sciences in its need to eliminate part-time faculty positions and replace them with tenure-faculty. The department also has the support of the Dean for a possible joint Master of Arts program to be developed jointly with the University of North Carolina-Asheville.

Faculty members have been actively developing on-line programs to meet the need for distance education. This supports one of the university's current initiatives.

II. WEAKNESSES

Staffing

1. Tenure-Line vs. Term Faculty

WCU, like many institutions trying to serve increasing student demand for lower-division course sections within limited budgetary resources, relies heavily on non-tenure-eligible faculty. Unlike many institutions, WCU has made a commitment to full-time visiting instructors and (in some cases) PhD-level assistant professors, instead of a corps of truly part-time adjunct faculty paid by the course with meager or no benefits or status. As WCU, particularly the number of majors in English, has grown, the number of tenure-line faculty has remained flat, and is now roughly equal to the number of non-tenurable faculty. This latter group seems to be highly capable, unusually well integrated in the life of the department, and valued by the students as well as their tenure-line colleagues, but the ceiling on their development and the decreased ratio of majors to faculty with terminal degrees inevitably limits the department's range of teaching and research capability, notwithstanding the many excellent scholarly records evident among the faculty cv's, including those of several instructors.

The matrix listings of faculty specialty areas in Appendix 4.2.2 of the department's self review shows, for example, a definite weakness in covering pre-1650 British literature, with no one covering Shakespeare and one medievalist who also covers three areas in the matrix listing for Professional Writing.

Aside from reducing the department's ability to staff sections of upper-division courses and provide expertise to MA students, the relative shortage of permanent faculty also diminishes the department's ability to engage effectively in service and governance tasks, which tend to devolve on certain active individuals rather than being broadly shared. The relative stability of the non-tenure-earning faculty is a definite plus, but should not be confused with the real benefit to the university of tenured faculty, preferably with

terminal degrees, in the key areas of teaching and mentoring students, performing service, and conducting research. The issue of enfranchisement of term faculty is mentioned on p. 13 of the department's report, and should be resolved expeditiously.

The calculation of workload, mentioned at several of our meetings with faculty and administrators, appears to be something of special interest to the English faculty given their diverse duties in undergraduate advising, site visits, thesis supervision, etc., and a variety of conventional classroom formats. The question of whether some faculty may be identified as research-active and others as teaching-focused is a long-term question for the faculty to consider in consultation with the chairperson and the dean. In the short term a clear, flexible system to determine credit-hour equivalencies for essential activities that directly support the teaching mission should be considered.

2. Clerical/Office Staffing and Office Resources

One of the most notable deficiencies included in the department's report was the inadequate staffing of the English office and the low level of certain kinds of office resources available to faculty, including furniture in good condition, bookcases, and especially copier availability. Attending to routine receptionist tasks, paperwork, bookkeeping, copying and other departmental functions would seem to require two full-time clerical staff members, plus several student workers. Also, if the report is correct (p. 14), there are about 90 English and Music faculty sharing one copier, obviously an inadequate level of support that should be remedied by leasing an additional copier, one for each department.

The department, like the rest of the university, has an attractive and useful web site, but maintaining it was noted as a weakness in the self-study, and perhaps this duty could be part of at least one additional full-time clerical position in the department.

Curricular and Related Issues

1. Programs

The department has strong and diverse programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and its recent addition of a Motion Picture Studies concentration is an exciting sign of growth. On the other hand, it may be that with its writing and literary concentrations, English education, and journalism, it is stretched too thin, especially in light of its difficulties hiring faculty to the tenure track. The future of the journalism concentration seems particularly unclear. The department's self-study barely mentions it, no one we spoke with seemed able to account for it, and no one is listed as its director on the WCU English web site. It seems on the verge of dying from neglect and should probably be eliminated or, for the sake of students hoping seriously to work in print journalism, moved to the Communication department. Likewise, without a stronger commitment to the new MPS concentration, its reliance on one faculty member in that area puts it in a somewhat tenuous position. The prospect of an MFA program seems

feasible, given the number of creative writing faculty and the possibility of a partnership with UNC-Asheville.

2. Online teaching

Several questions were on the minds of faculty whom we interviewed: How will this affect the quality of instruction? Will this further overburden the faculty? Or result in outsourcing of teaching under the WCU name? These are all valid concerns, and it may be to the department's advantage to devise its own plan for the inclusion or exclusion of online course delivery, including hybrid courses taught partially online. As with many other areas, this issue may come down to (1) university or state-level mandate; and (2) individual faculty initiative.

3. Assessment

The English faculty demonstrated an unusually high concern for curricular improvement during our visit, and this area appears to have already been identified as a concern. Outcomes assessment is being addressed in various ways, as noted in the self-study. Each program is assessed annually, though exactly how is not elaborated (p. 6). Outcomes goals are being more clearly formalized, which should help the department comply with the emphasis of current SACS principles. It was not entirely clear how the results of the MA comprehensive exam were being used to assess the outcomes of the graduate program, and the validity of the senior seminar as a means of assessing the undergraduate literature program appears to be under review. Universities often take for granted the ability of faculty with administrative duties to undertake fairly complex assessment procedures, and some systematic training for this and other areas of responsibility would be as useful for them as teaching-improvement seminars and workshops can be for faculty generally. Coordinating departmental assessment activities would seem to be an appropriate role for the Assistant Chair.

Resources for Faculty and Students

1. Technology and Equipment

The current availability of classroom technology did not appear to be an urgent problem, judging from the self-study and conversations with faculty. PC-equipped classrooms for writing instruction, supported by the university, seem fully adequate to that program, and a number of other classrooms have various capabilities. Still, the use of carts instead of permanently installed equipment can be at least an inconvenience and at times even an inhibition on the use of a full range of technologies and media. Dealing with portable equipment can take time away from teacher-student interactions as well. During our visit, Associate Vice Chancellor Beth Lofquist noted that there was no formal university mechanism for departments to propose projects (such as classroom upgrades) to be funded by students' educational technology fees, which have nearly tripled since 2001. More faculty and departmental input on specific uses for this money would make sense.

Faculty we spoke with seemed content with the state of their personal office PC's, if not the furniture, etc. Inkjet printers appear to be a need, but investing in personal laser printers would be more cost effective where access to the department's two networked printers is a problem. Site licenses for software (e.g. InDesign) needed for teaching students in professional writing and other areas is a need clearly stated in the self-study, and could also be addressed through student technology fees.

2. Graduate Student Support

This seems to be one of the major issues in the department and the university as a whole. The size of the English MA program (number of students) seems appropriate relative to the size of the department and university. The MA program is clearly thriving, but the number of assistantships and the amount of the stipend do not make the program especially competitive. An obstacle not emphasized during our visit, but substantial nonetheless, is that very few of the assistantships come with a full fee waiver, and only one out-of-state fee waiver is available to attract students nationally.

3. Student Scholarships

It was noted that none of the department's scholarships may be awarded to incoming students, which hampers recruitment of students who are offered better aid packages elsewhere. Also, it appears that those current students who do win departmental scholarships suffer a corresponding reduction in their overall financial aid from the university, negating the award as a net benefit and thus as a means of retention and/or recruitment. This situation clearly works against department efforts to recruit the most able students possible.

III. OPPORTUNITIES

Staffing

1. Faculty

In all planning, the English Department should take advantage of the wonderful synergy present in the department: a wholesome relationship among the tenured faculty, the term faculty, and both undergraduate and graduate students naturally sorts itself out, with people working happily and cooperatively at each level. The visiting team observed concern and diligence on the part of the tenured and tenure-track faculty, and enthusiastic participation on the part of term faculty. Performing their duties well is the paramount concern we observed. The students we met confirmed this evaluation. They were eager to learn and confident their instructors would lead them well. Undergraduates as well as graduate students were excited about research and extending the boundaries of their knowledge—a sure sign they were being taught and mentored well.

Nonetheless, as with the recent hiring of a film specialist, the hiring of new faculty with specialties suited to the current needs and prospects for future growth is key to the department's long-term ability to serve its students. Phased retirements have generally not led to new hires.

What might be done to alleviate this situation? The administration is concerned about the 80% faculty and is interested in replacing them. The department should have a strong voice in determining how many of these faculty lines will be converted to tenure-track and how many will remain as renewable instructorships. Here the department might find the means of addressing the relative lack of expertise in pre-1650 British literature—if that is something the department believes is important. The development of the writing tracks and the Motion Picture Studies concentration is quite laudable, and perhaps the department wishes to pursue emerging rather than traditional areas of study. This should however be a conscious decision reflecting departmental consensus and compatible with its long-term goals.

Associate Vice Chancellor Beth Lofquist noted an upcoming university-wide faculty load survey to be completed. This would be the ideal point at which to record systematically all the support activities carried out in the English department, from the assistance given to freshman seminars and liberal studies courses to heavy advising loads to site visits to thesis supervision. In its negotiations with administration, the department should point out that a differential teaching load, with targeted release time for research (and accompanying accountability) would be a good means of transition from a 4/4 standard load to the desired 3/3 load. Certainly the scholarly productivity of the current PhD faculty (and many of the MA faculty) shows that they would use the time responsibly, and in ways that would enhance the department's reputation and the attractiveness of its programs. The department must not lose this opportunity to document the numerous ways in which it employs faculty energy for the benefit of students.

The possibility of a combined WCU-UNCA creative writing MFA might be a way of generating additional local support and prestige for all programs in the WCU English department as well as strengthening ties between greater Asheville and the Cullowhee campus. On the other hand, the English department should consider officially dropping its journalism concentration, if only to clarify that students interested in careers in print media should pursue a major in Communication rather than English.

2. Office Staff

When staffing formulas decree additional staff, the department should consider bringing on candidates with considerable online expertise to maintain websites and increase the department's web presence.

Curricular and Related Issues

Although the Motion Picture Studies concentration has only its director as a full-time faculty member, several other faculty members have expertise in this area documented in

their cv's. Given the broad and highly successful recruiting agenda the department is pursuing, this concentration might be a great recruitment tool. As enrollment in the concentration grows, so should university resources for the program's support. With the screenwriting specialist about to move to another campus department, it seems opportune for the MPS concentration in English to establish a productive interdisciplinary relationship with the major in Motion Picture Production, to the mutual advantage of both programs.

Since online and blended instruction is emerging as a major focus for the UNC system, the English faculty might take a proactive position to determine how it wishes to proceed. Should any courses or programs go exclusively online? The department might convene a task force to address this issue before regulations are generated and enforced from above. Former WCU chemistry faculty member Frank Prochaska is the Executive Director of the UNC Teaching and Learning with Technology Collaborative; the department might contact him to discuss further planning parameters.

Assessment is a key area. Faculty workload to plan and execute assessment activities for concentrations and programs must be factored into the overall computation of load. Providing the institution with data for evaluation of courses and programs will be increasingly crucial, and the department should plan for adequate support. Course-wide assessments in the freshman writing sequence and assessments of the major such as those provided by the Major Field Achievement Test will have to be monitored by a faculty member or members who have been afforded the time to learn how to administer and interpret these or similar instruments. The department might consider partnering with the School of Education where appropriate to share expertise and benefits of software such TaskStream, which is already being used by the WCU School of Education for portfolio construction and assessment.

Resources for Faculty and Students

The department should continue to monitor the construction and renovation schedules of the university to ensure that classrooms in which composition is taught will have the appropriate hardware and software. Increasing the number of "Smart" classrooms will aid all departments and will be logical use of the student technology funds that all UNC system schools put to such purposes. In the absence of existing procedures for requesting specific application for such funds, the department might offer one in order to ensure optimal learning environments.

In discussions with faculty and administrators, the team learned that the University is well aware of the modesty of graduate financial aid and assistantships. The English department should make certain that it receives its fair share of additional resources as allocations are distributed in the future. To compete for top students, especially out-of-state applicants and those bound for PhD work, would probably require 10 full-fee assistantships with at least somewhat more attractive stipends. The teaching load in the second year (one course) does seem very conducive to completion of the academic program. It would also be extremely useful (an issue mentioned in the self-study) to

track the career paths of alumni more closely as one method of assessing the validity of the curriculum.

The department should institutionalize Assistant Chair Mary Adams's detailed tracking of graduates' employment and graduate study in order to be certain this exemplary resource is preserved and maintained. For program development, internal assessment, and accreditation visits, this information is invaluable; schools often have great difficulty obtaining such data, so the good work she has initiated must be continued.