External Review of Sonoma State English Department
Spring 2015

Sheree L. Meyer, Dean for Undergraduate Studies
Professor of English
California State University, Sacramento

This report is based on the following:

- English Department Self Study (including summary of and response to 2007-08 Program Review)
- Site Visit: March 2-3, 2015
- Review of English Dept. website and catalog

During the site visit, I had the pleasure of meeting with the Chair of the English Department, Dr. Chingling Wo, the Chair of the Assessment Committee, Dr. Brantley Bryant, tenured faculty from the department, lecturers from the department, Dean Stearns (Arts & Humanities), Bron Anderson and Angela Follenvaider, Provost Rogerson, AVP Elaine Sundberg, and both graduate and undergraduate students. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Wo and Dr. Bryant for their careful hospitality and collegiality.

Overall, I witnessed a strong and vibrant English Department that is generally successful in delivering its curriculum and meeting the needs of students at Sonoma State, even as it struggles with many of the same issues that face other CSU English Departments such as diminishing resources in the face of growing enrollment, fewer tenure and tenure track faculty, increasing numbers of contingent faculty, and competing curricular and service demands for General Education, Undergraduate major and Graduate Programs courses. My primary goal for this review is to provide recommendations for meeting the ongoing challenges faced by the department and to assist the department in planning for its future.

I will note here that in some instances, I lack—through no fault of the department or committee—some of the data that would permit more detailed recommendations for student success. While some statistics were provided (pp. 9-10 Self Study), additional comparative data for retention, persistence and graduation rates/years to graduation for the period under review would be useful to the department in establishing a baseline and goals for strategic planning. I, therefore, suggest that in collaboration with the campus Office of Institutional Research, the English Department ascertain its data needs to establish such a foundation for future planning.

This report does not claim to be exhaustive or to address all of the issues facing the department. Furthermore, I take responsibility for any potential errors of fact. I respect the fact that each campus and English Department has its own culture and

valuable strengths; there are no "one-size fits all" solutions even as many of the CSU English Departments face similar problems. I am, however, confident that the English Department at Sonoma State will continue to contribute to the vibrancy and mission of Sonoma State.

Commendations

1. Outstanding and committed faculty: while the number of tenure and tenure-track faculty members has been reduced during this period of time (from 15 in 2007 to 11 in Spring 2015), the remaining faculty members are highly qualified, engaged in their fields and in service to the department and university, and respected by their colleagues and students. Collectively and individually, those with whom I spoke are committed to the liberal arts mission of the University and to their students. The students with whom I spoke and those who responded to the Spring 2014 English Major Survey (pp. 28-30 Self Study) also commended the faculty of the English Department and recognized their dedication to students and their passion for and knowledge of their subjects.

2. While I will discuss some steps still to be taken, I do want to commend the English Department for its efforts to address some of the issues related to the growing number of adjunct faculty (in the face of reductions to tenure-track faculty and the growth of enrollment in Composition courses). It is evident that the English Department took the recommendations of its last review seriously and has—particularly in the last couple of years—sought to address some of the concerns expressed by the adjunct faculty. The adjunct faculty members with whom I spoke recognized those efforts and expressed their hope for continued improvement. They also were clearly committed to the Lower Division Composition program and to the students they serve.

3. Leadership and participation in campus-wide curricular and student success initiatives. These programs are representative of nationally recognized "best practices" in their respective areas.

    - Stretch Program: English 100A/B
    - Common Assignment on Information Competency
    - Directed Self-Placement Policy and Implementation
    - SSMP Update, 2014
    - Humanities Learning Community (HLC) and Second Year Research & Creative Experience (SYRCE) Course

4. Staff Support: While one full-time staff member serves two departments (Philosophy and English) and the part-time staff member is quite new to the department, I was impressed by their efficiency, careful articulation of their

division of labor, and their commitment to the improvement of administrative responsibilities and communication.

Recommendations

Curriculum & Assessment

The English Department at Sonoma State rightly takes pride in a curriculum and co-curricular activities that reflect "strength-in-diversity" (p. 3 Self Study) and allow the department to balance its common goals and outcomes with the diverse strengths and interests of its faculty. While the student survey provides a self-report of students' perceptions of their attainment of programmatic goals and outcomes, this tool does not provide the department with authentic and direct measures of its programmatic goals and outcomes, and, therefore, is less useful in assessing student learning and in closing the loop on curricular changes. Shifts in expectations for programmatic and university-level assessment and accreditation policies and procedures—for example, the emphasis in WASC reaccreditation on direct evidence of the five core competencies: written communication, oral communication, critical thinking, quantitative literacy and information literacy—will make it necessary for departments to provide similar evidence of authentic student achievement.

Recommendation #1
The English Department should engage in creating a 3-5 year Assessment Plan that will more fully provide data and evidence upon which to base curricular changes. Currently, their Goals and Outcomes (Attachment C—from 2007-2008) reflect what the document notes is a "generalized cluster of learning goals that it sees as fundamental for undergraduate and graduate students alike." This rather lengthy list includes 6 "Skills," 7 "Knowledge" goals, 3 "Experiences," and 4 "Values" statements. This is a rather unwieldy (and not always assessable) list from which to create an Assessment Plan.

The first step, therefore, would be to revisit these goals and outcomes to ascertain a) if they all remain common to all programs; and b) to determine which of them can and should be measured. One component of these conversations should also be if and how these goals align with campus baccalaureate and graduate learning goals.

The second step would be to determine how best to conduct such program-wide assessment of each learning outcome. Best practices in this area include the following—some of which are also high impact practices that contribute to student learning:

- Capstone Experiences: a common senior-level course that integrates the skills and knowledge attained throughout the program. The undergraduate major currently requires a senior-level course but the variety available does not serve this purpose.

- Signature Assignments: shared assignments that provide evidence of the attainment of shared outcomes. If comparative (pre- and post-) data is needed, sampling of signature assignments can be taken from the Intro to Literary Analysis and a senior-level course (perhaps a capstone)
- Common Rubrics: such rubrics (often built upon revised national rubrics such as the AAC&U Value Rubrics) should reflect and measure shared outcomes and when used to assess student work, should provide a snapshot of student achievement at various levels of development and at graduation
- E-Portfolios (course or program-based): E-portfolios are a productive way to document student achievement but also provide a way for students to engage in self-reflection of programmatic learning goals and outcomes. They can also follow the student into his or her career

Some of these—e.g. Capstone Experience—might require curricular change if no such shared senior seminar currently exists.

Once the department has established some evidence of actual achievement (or lack thereof), it can move on to discuss some of the curricular issues raised during this review:

- Is a 40-unit undergraduate major sufficient to attain the goals and outcomes of the program?
- Should the undergraduate program require certain courses (e.g. Shakespeare) or subject areas (e.g. global, multicultural, or ethnic literatures)?
- What should a 21st Century English Studies program look like? Should it, for example, look more multi-modal (beyond the traditional privileging of written texts) and more like some digital humanities programs? Are there gaps in the course options offered?
- Is the curriculum sufficiently sequenced, i.e. organized from first year to last in a way that makes developmental sense? If, for example, seniors are not achieving certain goals our outcomes at the senior-level, are those skills or content knowledge being introduced early enough in the curriculum?

Recommendation #2

While Recommendation #1 is pertinent to both Graduate and Undergraduate programs, this recommendation focuses on the Graduate M.A. program. Like many in the CSU, its strength is in its flexibility as a M.A. in English with multiple emphases. Such flexibility and diversity, along with the provision of teaching opportunities, does train students for future graduate studies and/or employment in community colleges or as adjuncts in the university. Indeed, many of the current graduate students are expecting to teach at both Sonoma State and Santa Rosa College upon graduation, and many of the current lecturers are Sonoma State alumni. As a rather small program (approximately 25 students), however, and given the department's other responsibilities, it is a challenge for the program to offer

sufficient course work in seminars related specifically to the three emphases: Literature, Creative Writing, and Composition/English Education.

While the graduate students with whom I met praised the faculty and the Graduate Coordinator, they expressed concern about the following issues:

- The Oral Exam in British and American Literature: This is presented as a "qualifying exam" that all students, regardless of their emphasis, must take. It should be taken in the first or second semester, although there are—as far as I can tell and suggested by one student who, in her culminating semester had not yet taken the exam—no holds placed on student's progress. There is a preparatory course (not mandatory) that provides units; however, those units do not count towards the degree. Another option for satisfying the requirement is to serve as a teaching assistant in an undergraduate British/American literature course. While this is an attractive option to students who do not want to take the exam, it is questionable whether the experiences are equivalent in workload or outcome. While the faculty members with whom I spoke seem to support this exam, despite the workload issues, and feel that it provides additional benefits to the students, I do encourage the department to reconsider this requirement and its options.

- Sufficient number of seminars particularly in Creative Writing and Comp/Rhet. While the students in Creative Writing have the option of "Directed Writing," they did express concern that such courses did not provide the kind of variety in genres or workshop/seminar environment in which they could learn from each other.

- Opportunities to present "culminating experiences." Students noted that while their colleagues in Creative Writing have the opportunity to showcase their projects, students in the other emphases do not.

- Some concern was expressed about consistency in the Research Methods course depending on the instructor. Agreement and discussion of shared learning outcomes for this critical Intro to Graduate Studies course should be shared by all instructors teaching the course; while flexibility in content is expected and appropriate, consistency in skills and outcomes should be similar.

- Within the parameters of Unit 11 Bargaining Unit requirements, the English Department should continue to offer training and experiences in teaching in the various sub-disciplines in English. Since so many of the potential MA candidates hope to teach at the community college, I encourage the department to explore partnering with Santa Rosa College to offer an internship in teaching at the community college. Current adjuncts teaching

at both institutions might be willing to mentor MA candidates at the community college.

Advising, Scheduling, & Communication

Recommendation #3
Currently, it is my understanding that advising is not assigned, i.e. students choose their own advisors based on their interests and areas of emphasis, and that faculty take advising seriously. There is, however, also evidence from the student survey and discussions with students that advising is still not optimal.

Below are some ways in which the current advising system could be enhanced.

- The creation of integrated "roadmaps" that assist students in planning both their major and GE courses for a four-year plan.

- Intrusive (mandatory) advising at certain 'points' in the student career and/or for certain high 'risk' student groups (It is often the case that students who most need advising/mentoring do not actively seek it. Student success data—retention, persistence, graduation—may help the department ascertain if there are key points or groups that need intrusive advising.

- Balance one-on-one advising with group or team advising. There is some recent research that indicates that group advising may actually have greater impact than one-to-one advising. Furthermore, if major advising and GE advising are typically separated, a team approach that includes both a major and a GE advisor can be useful.

- Balance one-on-one flexible assignment of advisors with scheduled drop-in group or one-on-one advising. For example, in the week prior to early registration, the department can host two days of drop-in advising during which all faculty members sign up for one hour of advising in a central location.

- Continued training in and use of he Academic Requirements Report

Recommendation #4
The new staffing in the English Department is making great strides in improving communication and in improving efficiency in scheduling in collaboration with the Chair, the Staffing Committee, and the Curriculum Committee.

- Continue improved and intentional scheduling to serve student and curricular needs—be careful with 4-hour block schedules that impede the students' ability to take courses outside the English Department.

- Make greater use of Social Media to reach students with announcements, information, etc.

- Consider fewer email announcements in favor of consistent weekly notices

Resources

There is no question that the recent Great Recession has had a profoundly detrimental effect on resources available to programs in the CSU, and that the English Department has felt that impact in a variety of ways: attrition in staffing, faculty, operational expenses, reassigned time, etc. It is also likely that the CSU will not see a full restoration of funding in the next few years and will, therefore, need to continue to pursue other funding sources and models of efficiency. That places a great deal of pressure on departments to not only 'do more with less' as we see our enrollments grow but to be particularly strategic in decisions related to curriculum, class size, enrollment, hiring, program planning, etc.

The English Department at Sonoma State has made commendable efforts to work within this new environment. The recommendations listed here are to assist the department in continuing to make the most of its resources and to make strong decisions and arguments for additional resources as they become available.

Tenure-Track Hiring

In conversations with the Provost Rogerson, Dean Stearns, and AVP Sundberg, it was clear to me that the English Department is highly respected by the administration of Sonoma State and central to its mission. The university has a 3 year plan for hiring tenure-track faculty but will approach hiring strategically and not simply based on one-to-one replacements for faculty lines lost to retirement, movement, etc. It is, therefore, critical that the English Department create a strong position from which to request future hires.

Recommendation #5
To strengthen its potential for future hires, I recommend that the department engage in the following steps:

- Engage in Assessment of Curriculum and Curricular Change (see Recommendation #1) to determine pedagogical and curricular "gaps". In an environment in which we are no longer replacing one 18th Century Brit Lit scholar with another 18th Century Brit Lit scholar, arguments for positions should be based on demonstrated need which should evolve from programmatic goals and outcomes.

- 3-5 Year Strategic Plan for Faculty Hiring—if, for example, the department decides to pursue a major program that focuses more on multicultural and

ethnic literature, that would be a factor in identifying a tenure-track line. Other factors like diversity of curricula, student body and faculty should be considered. In arguing for tenure lines, service to the department and university should also be considered.

- Continue to explore collaborative opportunities with other Sonoma State programs (for example, the opportunity that arose to share a hire with the Hutchins program) for joint hires. This can be tricky if it doesn't provide sufficient opportunities to serve the English Department, but it may be helpful in developing the curriculum and making incremental steps towards better staffing

Adjuncts

As mentioned earlier, it is obvious that some concrete actions have been taken to address concerns raised in the last Program Review. The formation of the LDCC, the opportunities for leadership roles for adjunct faculty, lecturer voting rights, etc. are all important steps to addressing the situations created by diminishing tenure-track lines and increasing adjunct positions. There are also limits circumscribed by contract and different sets of expectations for adjunct and tenured/tenure-track faculty. Ongoing respectful dialogue and mediation are necessary, and whenever possible, tenured/tenure-track faculty members should rotate through teaching some of the same courses as adjunct faculty, or at least engage in shared development of pedagogy that serve a variety of courses in the English Department.

Recommendation #6

- Work with IRT to provide access to student records for advising
- Work with IRT to provide ongoing email access during semesters when adjuncts may not be teaching
- Representation of Lecturers on Faculty website
- Continue to promote professional development and community-building – including tenured/tenure-track faculty through LDCC and other venues
- Work towards consistency of hiring, staffing, and evaluation of adjunct faculty
- Make visible standardized processes and timelines for hiring, staffing and evaluation of adjunct faculty. Standardizing practices in this area may also help alleviate tenured faculty workload in this area. For example, while peer observations are an essential element of evaluation, as the numbers of adjuncts grow and the number of tenured faculty members shrink, this can be an onerous task. I recommend limiting annual peer observations to the first three years of a lecturer's employment and then setting a periodic review cycle that seems reasonable given other evidence of satisfactory performance.

Technology & Space

Recommendation #7
There is no question that best pedagogical and curricular practices in English Studies require appropriate technology and classroom spaces. I, therefore, recommend that the English Department work with IT and the appropriate administrators to make sure that English Department faculty have sufficient access to "smart" classrooms, hardware, and software needed to provide a 21st century curriculum and to engage in 21st century research.

Reassigned Time

Recommendation #8
In times of reduced resources and diminished numbers of faculty lines, reassigned time for faculty leadership, service and coordination can be a double-edged sword since it takes tenured/tenure-track faculty out of the classroom and may, therefore, make it difficult to cover the curriculum. That said, I recommend that the English Department set priorities for reassigned time in the department based on shared values and expectations. Then in consultation with the administration, the department should request project-based or role-based reassigned time support.

In particular, I would like to note my concern regarding a 9 month Chair position. It has been my experience that the Chair's presence during the summer (when he or she is often the only available advisor, orientation, enrollment, changes in scheduling and staffing, etc. occur) is critical.

Key Coordinators, such as the Graduate Coordinator and the Writing Program Coordinator, should also be appropriately supported—either through the assignment of appropriate courses that support those positions and/or through reasonable reassigned time. English Departments are service-driven (both in service to their degree programs and to the university at-large). For term-based positions such as the Chair and elected or appointed coordinators, assigned time should be ongoing for the period of their assignment.

Funding & Development

Recommendation #9

In this time of dwindling public support and rising tuition, it is also essential that the English Department consider ways in which it can work with appropriate entities on campus to make its valuable contributions visible, to communicate its values and importance effectively, to tell its stories, and to raise funds to support its endeavors. To that end, I recommend the following:

- Work with Public Affairs and internal publications to promote English Department faculty and student achievements

- Work with Alumni Association to establish a strong ethic of "giving back" to the English Department (explore the possibility of an English Major alumni group)

- Work with Research & Sponsored Projects to identify internal, system-wide, and external grants opportunities. Prioritize goals and apply for grants that support those goals

- Work with Advancement & Development to pursue donors and fund-raising opportunities to support programming, scholarships, publications, etc.

Respectfully Submitted,
Sheree Meyer
3/31/15