

# Sonoma State Masters in English Program External Reviewer Report

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### 1. Introduction

This document serves as my External Program Review for the Masters in English Program (hereafter MEP) at Sonoma State University (SSU). Herein, I attempt to describe what I see as the main strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the program. In preparation for this report, I have read the *Graduate Program Review, Sonoma State University, Master of Arts in English (Self-Study)*; interviewed Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies Stacey Bosick, Interim Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities Edward Beebout, Department Chair Tim Wandling, English Department Tenure Track/Tenured and lecturer faculty, current MA students, and a recent program alumni; toured English Department facilities; and read published information about the MEP, the Department, and the University. Administrator, faculty, and student comments cited throughout are based on notes I have on file. The impressions that I received from all of these regarding present strengths and weaknesses were remarkably consistent, and the Department as a whole is self-evidently a model of collegiality and mutual support. I have organized this report into five main sections (plus Introduction and Conclusion) as defined by SSU's *External Reviewer Guidelines for Program Review*.

My top-level observations are as follows:

1. MEP faculty are excellent. They bring a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches to their material, as well as sincere dedication to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion and genuine care for their students;
2. Curriculum is strong, and faculty are committed to examining some of the most important, current issues in the field and in the wider culture that surrounds us. Faculty bring these issues to courses throughout the MEP;

3. Faculty retirements and one faculty leaving for another position have significantly curtailed MEP course offerings, mentorships, and advising, particularly in American Literature and Creative Writing, which are areas of significant student interest, *and* have the potential to align closely with SSU campus priorities, including support of the campus's role as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), offerings of new GE Area F Ethnic Studies courses, and support of underrepresented minority (URM) students;
4. Current faculty are strained to the breaking point with teaching, service, and unsupported administrative work, with unremunerated advising and mentoring of students, and even with simply meeting the course needs of MEP students from semester to semester. This situation is, in my estimation, unsustainable, and requires immediate administrative support.

In what follows, I provide evidence for these conclusions, and make recommendations for steps that the MEP could take to build on their strengths and address some of their weaknesses. The Department has a supportive Chair and a supportive Dean. Planned (but as yet unspecified and presumably as yet undetermined) campus restructuring is a source of great concern among the faculty, and rightly so. I would not be so Panglossian as to suggest something like: "This is a great opportunity for the department!" Rather, it necessitates that the Department engage meaningfully with the restructuring process and look for any possible alignments and complementary goals. The University has some strategic initiatives and goals that I believe align very well with the stated values and objectives of the Department. I discuss these in Section 5: *Sufficiency of resources*. I hope that this report is received in the spirit in which I write it — with a desire to help the Department and MEP sustain their program, advance their values, and achieve their goals, and so I hope that this report will be considered with care by the department and by SSU's Administration.

## **2. Curriculum coherency and currency**

The English MA program has three distinct tracks, which are woven together to provide coherence. The tracks are:

- Literary Criticism
- Creative Writing
- English Education/Rhetoric

All English MA students take a shared set of Core Courses that help build comradery with each cohort. These are ENGL 500: Research and Critical Writing; ENGL 530: Graduate Workshop in Creative Writing and/or ENGL 587: Seminar: Rhetorical Theory; and at least two literary studies seminars. Following coursework, students produce a variety of culminating projects, such as "a critical thesis, a curricular development research report, a book-length manuscript, or a digital arts project" (Self-Study, p. 3. Hereafter, page numbers refer to the Self-Study).

The program is centered on “one-on-one mentoring and faculty-supported, student self-directed, and project-based explorations” (p. 3), with “a commitment to language as a space for identity-based inquiry and a praxis of empowerment” (p. 18). While graduate students focus on one of the three tracks, Professor and former Chair Stefan Kiesbye describes them as mutually enriching, as students from all three tracks work collectively toward the common goal of “living and working in the field of literature.”

The most important facet of the MA in English as regards *currency* is the department-wide dedication to thoughtful integration of principles of diversity and inclusion at all levels of curricular development and pedagogic strategies. These are deeply aligned with SSU’s campus-wide initiatives, including its status as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Further, actively working to make students feel supported, welcomed, and included in the life and curriculum of the department helps improve student success through increased retention and progress toward graduation. As the Self-Study notes:

The English Department has very consciously committed to the shared task of studying difference as an ongoing process subject to reinvention and revision. This interest is longstanding, but over the last several years, the faculty have worked as a body not to take attention to diversity for granted. The faculty are conscious of the ease with which “diversity” can and does get reduced to byword and catchphrase (p. 26).

Of course, many US universities have updated their mission statements to include advocacy Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), but this is more often than not rhetorical positioning rather than sincere commitment backed up with thoughtful curricular and systemic change. It is therefore all the more noteworthy to see the English Department faculty are working to move beyond their own “Anglocentric graduate training” by “making sure to emphasize the work of BIPOC and LGBTQ critics, theorists, and writers,” by “becoming more direct and candid in encouraging ... students to discuss in depth the fraught, complicated relations between the privileged and the less represented,” and by focusing on literatures that “offer glimpses of life overlooked by the dominant discourse” (p. 30). Faculty comments throughout the report evince particular care and attentiveness to the fostering of a welcoming, inclusive academic and creative culture in the English Department, one that “encourage[s] curiosity, open discussion, and mutual tolerance” (p. 31).

The Department’s 8 tenure-track and tenured (TT/T) faculty cover very wide range of periods (Classical to postmodern), cultures (e.g. medieval English, 18th century British, Chicana/Latina, and Chinese cultures), and theoretical approaches (e.g. ecocriticism, ethnography, feminism, intersectional sexualities, monster studies, postcolonial literature, posthumanism, raciolinguistics,

and more). This breadth will be curtailed with the impending retirements of FERP faculty Prof. Anne Goldman (American Literature/Creative Writing, but also Chicana, African American, and Jewish literature), Scott Miller (Composition-Rhetoric, but also modern myth), and Prof. John Kunat (Renaissance literature, but also New Sexualities).

The Department's faculty have been substantially diminished through attrition, and this will continue in the coming semesters. Coverage lost due to faculty retirements is in essence random; this is *directly opposed* to thoughtful and programmatic departmental redesign. This is, of course, in no way the fault of the Department, which is clearly doing all it can under severe constraints. However, students are highly attuned to and frustrated by the shifts in coverage. As two students explained in interviews, the graduate students generally want to focus on American literature, but the majority of the remaining faculty specialize in British literature, though they acknowledge that many of these faculty introduce at least some literature from outside Britain in their courses. Indeed, some Americanist lines have been unfilled for fifteen years. There were once three, and now there is one TT/T Americanist, Prof. Kim D. Hester Williams. Several members of the department praised her teaching and scholarship, though the Chair noted that her joint appointment with American Multicultural Studies does mean that the lone remaining Americanist is not able to offer a full teaching load in English.

In order to deepen their praxis of inclusivity, “the program has recently expanded in areas of culture-sustaining pedagogy, the use of grading contracts, and anti-racist pedagogy” (p. 7). However, again, the loss of a member of the faculty hampers this effort. The Self-Study identifies Dr. Megan McIntyre, who left in Summer 2022, as a key force in “this focused curricular development” (p. 7). In sum, the MEP program curriculum's coherence and currency are both excellent, but also both imperiled by diminishing faculty ranks.

### **3. Relevance and clarity of learning outcomes and integration with curriculum**

The Self-Study describes five “aspects” of the Department's alignment of curriculum and Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs, p. 21):

1. Demonstrate advanced critical and analytical reading skills.
2. Utilize sound methodologies (including textual analysis, application of critical theory, academic research, and/or qualitative methods) for investigating questions in English studies.
3. Articulate a critical understanding of language and its relationship to power.
4. In reading, writing, and/or analysis of texts, demonstrate recognition of centuries of injustice based on intersecting categories of race or ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, home language, religious beliefs, and/or immigration status.
5. Write effectively, considering audience, context, and purpose, as well as the relevant protocols for compiling and disseminating one's scholarly or creative work.

6. Develop a distinctive voice and perspective, writing with attention to the rhythms and nuances of language, whether as a scholar or a creative writer.

In interviews with several current MA students and one recent MA graduate, students were unified in their praise for the department's cultural climate and strong sense of community, which is an element of the first PLO. They spoke of their "love for the program, faculty, and fellow students," and their appreciation of the sense of "community and camaraderie" in the program. They further applaud the department's strong support for students with disabilities, and one student with a disability celebrated the Department as a place where they felt "unconditionally accepted." Another stated that they "never felt so comforted by an academic environment," which is demanding but also fosters important skills. Unsurprisingly, they find that some faculty are more fully present and involved in the program than others, and are grateful to these professors, who have created an environment that one student described as "a treasure." Multiple individuals singled out Prof. Chingling Wo for her central role in fostering a sense of community among the graduate students.

Prof. Kiesbye described the Department as a "peaceful, tight-knit community" where dedicated faculty "tailor the curriculum to the changing needs of student populations." Even through the heart of the Covid pandemic, he said, "people rallied together to find ways to continue to create a sense of presence and collectivity." Dean Edward Beebout confirms the notable degree of collegiality in the department, "all the more remarkable in these strained times." Prof. Theresa Burruel-Stone, the most recent faculty hire, feels "really supported by the rest of the Department in a number of ways." While she arrived with "lots of experience teaching, ... there is helpful feedback as needed," including via peer classroom observations, and "lots of great guidance on which committees to join and when," as well as strong support for her scholarship.

Faculty currently cover a wide breadth of methods, as sought in the second PLO (see [Section 2: Curriculum coherency and currency](#) for details on various methodologies). This range is, as noted in Section 2, imperiled by the diminishment of the faculty. Each member of the faculty brings to the program an impressive methodological range, which is a great asset; however, this means that each retirement or resignation brings with it a substantive loss of methodological and cultural coverage.

The third PLO pertains to "language and power." The Self-Study states that MEP faculty:

work with intentional course content that engages with the relationship between language and power, or hierarchies in the classroom, as well as in the civic space of larger communications. We provide the study of theory, the study of non-traditionally canonical works, global Englishes as well as student-ready (home-languages).

Students teaching in the ENGL 100 program noted the excellence of the pedagogy course, ENGL 587: Seminar: Rhetorical Theory, in training them in a range of pedagogic theories. They did, though, voice a desire for more *practical* teaching advice as they have felt somewhat unprepared for and overwhelmed by the more quotidian challenges of teaching. One practical suggestion offered was to invite students currently teaching in the program to speak with the future Teaching Associates about their experiences.

I applaud the department's inclusion of their fourth PLO, which requires students to consider the historical legacy of injustices, which are in line with SSU's first of four Core Values, "Diversity and social justice." (*Strategic Plan 2025: Building Our Future @ SSU*, 1 <https://strategicplan.sonoma.edu/>). It is rare to see these values, often professed by academics, reflected at the departmental level in formal documents, policies, and procedures. The underlying values are further explored in *Section C2. Exploring Diversity in Faculty Courses* (p. 26-28). Students find faculty sincere in their efforts to address a wide range of complex and overlapping intersectional identities in their courses. They note, though, that "students arrive in the program with all sorts of issues," by which they mean biases or bigotries, that they express in classroom discussions. This is inevitable, and all indications are that the Department takes it seriously. Faculty cannot (and perhaps should not) prevent students from expressing views that some might find offensive, but should be sure to clearly and directly address views that contradict the Department's stated values.

Prof. Anne Goldman believes that the faculty's focus on race may at times come at the expense of consideration of other facets of non-normative identities, though she suggests that the department is doing the necessary work of "decentering the 'North Star' of the historically entitled and protected group." I have long considered race to be the preeminent issue of our times — a claim that I have been making in just these words for decades, and which seems as true to me in 2023 as it did in 1989 — and my study of the program does not evince any overemphasis of this signal feature of US culture, politics, and literary arts. The Department's focus on intersectionality further emphasizes the integration of the study of race with other elements of identity. Still, one student did note that, as an "older student," they did not "feel fully seen by other students or faculty." While this was only one comment, and from a student who otherwise praised the MEP, this might be an identity position deserving of more consideration.

Regarding the fifth and final PLO, which encourages students to develop "distinct voices and perspectives," current students desire additional formal feedback from faculty on their writing. They would appreciate further constructive criticism, perhaps through more formal drafting processes built into the structure of their courses. They find the faculty highly supportive and available outside of class, but would like to see more mentorship in the development of their writers' voices *within* classes, as well. Further, students agree that the MEP does an excellent job

of welcoming incoming students into the program and fostering a sense of inclusion, but they wish for additional guidance for students finishing the program, in particular those working on their theses. This can often be an isolating experience, and while students say that faculty are responsive to queries, they would like to see more structure and proactive contact. It might be worth some care and deliberation by the faculty to see if they can generate new structures and systems to make this stage less lonesome. Indeed, one student seemed especially unsure and anxious, and stated that they felt “in over [their] head” in their thesis project.

However, the main complaint from current students is that they feel the program does not offer enough graduate seminars. This restricts student choice, in that they generally take whatever seminars are offered, rather than selecting those of greatest interest. Chair Wandling opined that he has had to spend a great many hours helping students find paths to graduation. The lack of seminars can also extend time to graduation. Indeed, all three students of a current cohort plan to stay in the program for three years rather than two, as is theoretically the design of the program, and as is the standard across US institutions of higher education. Faculty noted in interviews that they want the students to stay as long as they wish in order to explore, to have time for personal growth and intellectual expansion. In principle, I agree with this approach. However, it is worth bearing in mind that this is not a fully-funded graduate program. Students are in large measure paying their way through it, and so additional semesters come at additional cost to the students. If students are making the choice to stay for a third year out of a genuine desire to learn more and deepen the content of their research and writing, then this is a positive arrangement, but if they are staying around for an additional year due to insufficient course offerings, then it is a problem to be addressed. This situation may also hinder efforts to recruit Pell Grant eligible students, first generation college students, and members of historically marginalized groups. The only reliable route to increasing course offerings is, of course, to hire additional TT/T faculty. This would help the program meet several of its PLOs. The department’s Five Year Plan does include as a goal, “Continue to make our MA degree more affordable, while balancing our students’ pace of self-development with timely graduation” (43). I’d suggest that greater availability of timely graduation is an issue of equity, and therefore to be sought.

I have a few additional notes regarding the relevance and clarity of learning outcomes and integration with curriculum that do not pertain to any particular PLO but rather, seem to bear on the relevance of elements of the curriculum to the PLOs, as a whole. First, several students questioned the content of the qualifying exam generally taken in the first year of the program. They referred to it as “problematic” and noted that the authors featured therein lack the diversity that the Department otherwise celebrates. Indeed, I was surprised to hear “the literary canon” invoked by administration, faculty, and students throughout the day of my site visit. I realize that I come to this task as something of an outsider not only to SSU but also to the discipline of English, as I am an art historian by training and profession. In art history, the notion of “the canon” has been widely critiqued for decades and is generally covered as a historiographical

artifact rather than a valid category deserving perpetuation. I had not heard this notion invoked as if it referred to some generally-agreed-upon set of great texts for many years. Of course, the scholars who inspired the deconstructive work of examining the canon in art history were in Linguistics and other textual fields. I was therefore surprised to hear “the canon” and “canonical works” used without apparent irony in the MEP.

At a minimum, students would appreciate it if faculty would avoid teaching in seminars texts that they have all studied for qualifying exams. Indeed, some noted that there were texts that they read three or four times while studying for the exam and taking courses. They would really like to see the list for the exams heavily edited to include more world literature in English rather than having a tight focus on British and US literature. In essence, what they are asking for is for the qualifying exam to more closely reflect the values of the program. If the faculty are to escape their “Anglocentric graduate training,” if they are “to emphasize the work of BIPOC and LGBTQ critics, theorists, and writers,” and if they wish to celebrate texts that “offer glimpses of life overlooked by the dominant discourse” (p. 30), then it seems that the reading list for the qualifying exam is ripe for reexamination. This is somewhat surprising, given that the Self-Study lists “Reforming the qualifying exam” as one of the recent responses to 2021 WASC recommendations (p. 20).

Second, students expressed a desire for a pedagogy of writing that also aligns more closely with the Department’s stated values. Faculty advance antiracist, decolonial projects in many ways, but students find that that teaching of writing still largely advances the grammatical and stylistic conventions of so-called Standard English. One student articulated the tension they felt regarding this as a choice between “viability in the capitalist market” and “teaching what is *just* and *right*.” Ideally, a writing program would teach both, preparing students to meet the expectations of hiring committees while also fostering subversion of these very expectations so that students can plot their own course through systems of language and literature, en route to “finding distinct voices and perspectives,” and so that when these students are, themselves, in positions of authority, they will be positioned to overturn these conventions that are steeped in a historical legacy of racism and classism.

Two final thoughts regarding the integration of learning outcomes with curriculum:

1. In section D, under *Building a Community of Critical Readers and Writers*, the Self-Study states that “courses are taught as small seminars with approximately ten to twenty participants.” Arguably, a twenty-student seminar is a fairly *large* seminar (p. 33), especially at the graduate level.
2. The Self-Study includes assessment materials for ENGL 500: Research and Critical Writing. These materials are difficult to interpret. If they are clarified in a final draft of the Self-Study, I will attempt again to interpret them (see *Notes for Suggested Revisions* at the start of this document).



#### **4. Meaningfulness and effectiveness of learning outcomes assessment and use of assessment for program improvement**

In 2021, in a review of undergraduate and graduate programs in English, WASC recommended a university-wide review of the graduate programs, focusing on assessment; incorporation of insights from the program review with SSU learning objectives; and use of data tools to improve the program. The Self-Study indicates that the department has taken this on with great seriousness, implementing “retreats, focus groups, and curriculum assessments ... [to] help our program nurture a culture of programmatic and curricular reflections” (p. 20).

Some faculty and administration find SSU’s culture of assessment disappointing. The faculty genuinely desire to achieve their PLOs, and wish, as Prof. Goldman puts it, for students “to exit each class enriched and inspired, as better citizens, with well-developed emotional and intellectual resources.” However, many find (as seems to be ubiquitous across US institutions of higher education) that the assessment processes at SSU are burdensome, bureaucratic hurdles that do little to help them achieve these goals.

The MEP conducted an assessment of ENGL 500: Research and Critical Writing, a core MA course, using MEP learning objectives, which resulted in the following changes (p. 20):

- Reforming the qualifying exam
- Consolidation of culminating experience
- Setting up milestones for a clear path of progression

The Self-Study states that the MEO “saw the two-year graduation rate stabilize to around 50%” between 2014 and 2020 (p. 22). I am not sure that this accurately describes the data provided for two-year graduation rates for these years. The data quite varied from 2012 to 2019, and is not provided for 2020 (p. 24). Still, the Self-Study makes clear that the English faculty do not “chase after the numbers but to maintain a culture of support and accommodation for students’ diverse learning and life conditions” (p. 22). This is laudable from a pedagogical perspective, and also from an ethical and humane one, though it is surely out of step with University directives and the 2021 WASC recommendations. Total graduation rates are provided in Chart 4 (p. 24, the first of two different charts labeled “Chart 4”).

The chart of graduation rates surprisingly does not provide totals that would result from adding the “2 Years” and “More than 2 years” graduation rates, but they would vary considerably, from a high of 100% for the 2016 cohort to a low of 36.4% for the 2013 cohort. I have updated this chart as follows:

Percent of starting cohort who graduated in	F 2012	F 2013	F 2014	F 2015	F 2016	F 2017	F 2018	F 2019
2 Years	22.2%	9.1%	45.5%	57.1%	88.9%	50.0%	53.3%	52.9%
More than 2 years	33.3%	27.3%	27.3%	28.6%	11.1%	25.0%	26.7%	5.9%
<b>Total [added by ASM]</b>	<b>55.5%</b>	<b>36.4%</b>	<b>72.8</b>	<b>85.7%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>58.8%</b>

The main improvement in 2-year graduation rates seems to be between 2012 and 2014, with an anomalous peak in 2016.

These numbers would be more meaningful if considered in light of the cohort sizes for these years. Under *Student Cohort Size* (p. 12), the Self-Study notes large fluctuations from year to year, but only provides data for 2018-2019 (5 students), 2019-2020 (21 students), and 2020-2021 (8 students). This means that the 80% total graduation rate for the 2018 cohort represents 80% of 8, which is not a whole number and therefore does not seem possible. The same is true of the “2 Years” and “More than 2 years” numbers. I am similarly unable to square the graduation percentages with the 21 students in the 2019 cohort. This may be the result of my misunderstanding of the data as given or of my poor arithmetic skills. However, without this contextualization of the percentages, it is difficult to interpret them. It is possible that the highest graduation rates represent the smallest cohorts, but then, it is also possible that they reflect excellent success with the largest cohorts. In any case, the department is right to be concerned that their improvements from 2012 and 2013 are jeopardized by the significant diminishment of the English faculty (p. 24).

The most compelling result from the assessment of ENGL 500 is the revelation of a mismatch between the faculty and student understandings of two of the six PLOs (p. 31):

Objective 3: “Articulate a critical understanding of language and its relationship to power”

Objective 4: “In reading, writing, and/or analysis of texts, demonstrate recognition of centuries of injustice based on intersecting categories of race or ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, home language, religious beliefs, and/or immigration status.”

As the Self-Study notes:

curricular design emphasizes our students gaining awareness of oppression enforced by dominant, hegemonic language tradition and culture, whereas our English MA students would like to acquire the ability to use language as a vehicle of empowerment and social change (p. 32).

While the pool of surveyed students was small and the results in essence anecdotal, this distinction between faculty and student perspectives may reflect larger trends in orientations to problems of power inequality. While faculty are interested in exploring the historical roots of power imbalances, students are seeking to be agents of change. Both are worthwhile. Indeed, it is unlikely that the latter can be accomplished without the former. The English Department has responded to this student desire with ENGL 588: Seminar: Study of Language. Hopefully, future rounds of review will indicate that MEP students and faculty are more closely aligned in their understandings of these important PLOs

**5. Sufficiency of resources and how they affect the quality of the learning experience; consider, for example, faculty, facilities, support, information resources, and research resources.**

The Department is in the midst of a very rapid decline in faculty. It had 13 TT/T faculty in 2020, and will be reduced to 6 TT/T faculty by 2024. More than half of faculty will have been lost to retirements and leaving for other jobs in just four years, unless the SSU Administration approves new hires to ameliorate this loss.

While everyone I spoke with was of one mind regarding the dire problem of insufficient faculty, Prof. Goldman put these problems in the most stark of terms. When asked, “Do you feel that the department has sufficient resources to thrive and support the graduate program,” her response was “a resounding *no*.” I noted that multiple faculty had described the Department as “a leaky boat,” and she responded that “the boat is not leaky. It has sunk.” While Prof. Goldman is nearing retirement, she worries that the mid-level faculty are “being drowned.” Decisions are largely “triage to get students through,” and without hires, the Department — not merely the MEP — “cannot continue.” Dean Beebout affirms the seriousness of the situation. He notes that the “inadequate” number of TT/T faculty cannot merely be replaced with part-time lecturers because, while they can and do teach excellent courses, they are not expected to provide

advising, develop and guide curriculum, and otherwise participate in crucial departmental activities. Despite these great adversities, Chair Wandling and most members of the faculty maintain that the MEP is nonetheless managing to do a good job serving their students. The question is: *for how long?*

It is clear, based on the Self-Study and interviews with Department faculty and Chair, Dean of Arts and Humanities School, and graduate students past and present that new hires are necessary. The Self-Study states that the department is seeking two hires, one in Creative Writing and one in Contemporary American Literature. I concur that these are necessary in order for the Department to stay competitive. Indeed, they are necessary if the Department is to remain capable of supporting its students — graduate and undergraduate. The Department and Chair believe that the Dean is supportive, but has thus far lacked support from upper administration to secure the needed funding for this program. Indeed, one individual stated, in reference to the administration, that “the intellectual life of the university is harmed by their lack of support for student and faculty research.”

There is at present a single TT/T faculty in Creative Writing, though this concentration accounts for half the students in the Department. Further, the single TT/T faculty, Prof. Stefan Kiesbye, bears some administrative responsibilities and so does not teach a full load. Department faculty and Chair Wandling praise the lecturer faculty in the program, but are in general agreement that lecturers cannot fully ameliorate the problems of the lack of TT/T faculty

Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies Stacey Bosick and Dean Beebout were candid about the prospects of hiring new faculty to “replace” faculty who have retired from or left SSU. According to AVP Bosick, SSU is going to undergo serious restructuring in the coming semesters. She encourages English Department faculty to participate actively in fora and to provide feedback to the Provost regarding potential systems for restructuring.

Neither Dean Beebout nor AVP Bosick thinks it likely that new TT faculty will be approved simply to fill the role of previous members of the faculty. Rather, both encourage the Department to align any hire requests with SSU’s strategic priorities. I realize that faculty often bristle at having to align their programmatic needs with shifting mandates from upper administration and from the Chancellor’s Office, but in this case, I believe that certain strategic priorities and needs of SSU correspond very closely with the values of the Department. I hope that they will see the following suggestions not as craven capitulation but rather as a useful strategy to achieve what genuinely are shared goals — at least rhetorically. As an HSI, SSU has a particular obligation to support its Latinx and Chicanx students. AVP Bosick states that this population of students “needs to be served.” Similarly, the campus must meet the enrollment needs of the new statewide GE Area F requirement in Ethnic Studies, which could have natural links with HSI status, as

courses in Ethnic Studies are required to be within “African American, Asian American, Latina/o American or Native American Studies” (<https://calstate.policystat.com/policy/8919100/latest/>). Both service to the campus’s HSI status and to the Ethnic Studies requirements could be natural manifestations of the Department’s “Ongoing Reinventions of the Teaching of Difference.” As the Self-Study argues, “the faculty of the English Department recognize the necessity not only for continued revision of their pedagogy with respect to notions of diversity, but sustained self-critique,” and in so doing, call for “a theoretical apparatus that is flexible and responsive” (p. 28). In this section, the Self-Study provides a genuinely inspiring list of MEP faculty that are taking up this work with seriousness of purpose. The following section of the Self-Study describes the MEP’s “Commitment to Serve a Diverse Group of Students,” which is, again, fully in accord with SSU’s needs. In this section, MEP faculty describe their “concerted and unremitting effort to find the best methods of engaging students as whole people, and in creating classroom atmospheres that encourage curiosity, open discussion, and mutual tolerance” (p. 31).

AVP Bosick asks that the Department be very specific about their faculty needs, and that they tie these needs to the sorts of initiatives I have noted here. She asks that hire requests directly address how such hires would help SSU meet the goals of the CSU system-wide Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI2025), and how they would help achieve related student success goals. There is a happy confluence of the MEP’s trenchant rhetoric and the explicit mandates of GI2025, which seeks to better meet the needs of historically underserved student populations, to “promote equitable learning” with an awareness that “What happens in the classroom plays a significant role in a student’s sense of belonging, their gain or loss of academic confidence and ultimately if they earn a degree”

(<https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/why-the-csu-matters/graduation-initiative-2025/closing-the-equity-gap/Pages/promote-equitable-learning-and-reduce-dfw-rates.aspx>).

Similarly, the Self-Study argues:

Negotiating difference, honoring difference, and then asking students to honor each other in the classroom is not always a given. In fact, as necessary and enriching it is, it is hard to sustain amid a larger world that remains increasingly divided. The English Department acknowledges that this work requires a level of humility as well as self-awareness on the part of its faculty, as well as a concerted and unremitting effort to find the best methods of engaging students as whole people, and in creating classroom atmospheres that encourage curiosity, open discussion, and mutual tolerance.

And, in concord with this, GI2025 calls on programs to adopt “[g]rowing cultures of care” for “students of color, Pell grant recipients and first-generation students”

(<https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/why-the-csu-matters/graduation-initiative-2025/closing-the-equity-gap/Pages/reengage-and-reenroll-underserved-students.aspx>). These are not synonymous

statements, but clearly speak to a common goal that I would suggest emphasizing in requests for new faculty hires.

Similarly, both the Department and AVP Bosick wish to see the MA program grow. AVP Bosick asks the Department to ask themselves, “What are their hopes and dreams? Where are they headed and how can [she] and the dean support them? What do they need beyond more faculty? What kinds of funding, pairings, and partnerships with other programs?” In a sense, the current MEP faculty, who primarily focus on British Literature, are not in alignment with the program’s well-articulated antiracist, decolonial, inclusive values. Department Chair Wandking noted that there are, for example, clear opportunities to ally with American Multicultural Studies, Chicano and Latino Studies, Global Studies, and Native American Studies in pursuit of new faculty who could teach within the MEP while also helping SSU meet its Area F staffing requirements.

As I understand it, the current workload structure does not compensate faculty for the work of overseeing students in ENGL 595: Special Studies or ENGL 599: Thesis and Accompanying Directed Reading, which do not count toward WTU. This is far from ideal. These activities, while quite different from a lecture course or seminar, are nonetheless valuable and time-consuming pedagogic practices. Faculty should be credited or otherwise remunerated for this work, which is the backbone of the MA program, currently performed without compensation. Even a single course release for the mentorship of many students over the course of a few years would be an improvement over the current system. He rightly describes the program as “a labor of love” that is “doing an excellent job of educating students,” but this work nonetheless remains *work* and should be remunerated like any other work performed in pursuance of job duties.

In a separate context, Dean Beebout described ENGL 494: Advanced Survey, a course that functions to give MEP students course credit for the study groups for their qualifying exams. Dean Beebout suggested that an equivalent course be created for students to work collectively while writing their theses. This could provide a greater sense of community while also assisting students with financial aid and other systems that set minimum enrollments. A third benefit could be the awarding of WTU to faculty, perhaps in rotation, for oversight of this group. There may well be institutional barriers that I am not aware of, but this might be worth investigating.

The Self-Study provides responses to the previous external program review (2015). Of note is the increase in sections of ENGL 530: Graduate Workshop in Creative Writing to every other semester, as well as more frequent offering of sections of ENGL 587: Seminar: Rhetorical Theory and ENGL 588: Seminar: Study of Language (p. 40).

One more area in which the MEP could use additional support is in the advertisement of the program and its accomplished faculty. Both faculty and students observed that there is little

celebration of the Department's accomplishments outside of the School of Arts and Humanities. Doing so would both improve morale within the MEP and potentially attract additional students.

## **6. Understanding of students' needs, challenges, and characteristics and ability to effectively serve the program's students.**

The introduction to Section C: *Highlights of Faculty* establishes a fundamental commitment to diversity as foundational to all that the department does "in and out of the classroom" (p. 25). In their research, members of the faculty "have published research that foregrounds racial, ethnic, cultural, class, gender, and religious differences" (p. 26). Faculty consider not only diverse content and curricula, but also "a range of pedagogical and methodological approaches to the teaching of difference" (p. 25). Faculty bring this work into the classroom in a variety of thoughtful manners. This may in part account for the marked improvements in URM representation. The Self-Study also credits this to increasing faculty diversity, a strategy that should continue. From Fall 2016 to Fall 2020, URM students increased from 12.8% to 25.9% of the MEP, and first generation college students from 20.5% to 37% (p. 17).

Surprisingly, the majority of applicants (60%) list "a desire for self-development and self-actualization" (p. 13), rather than career development or progress toward additional graduate work. This suggests that MEP curriculum should contain a healthy emphasis on the sorts of teaching that are near and dear to most humanities faculty, not the career-training work but the focus on literature, culture, contemplation, and argumentation.

I see that "the English MA removed the culminating exam option from the program's manual," but that the option does still exist "on a case-by-case basis, in extenuating situations" (p. 24). If this option is not described in the program manual, students must rely on their advisors suggesting it. It is good to see that this change has led to greater coherence and mutual respect among students in the three MA tracks. However, if this option *does* still exist, it would perhaps be more equitable to note within the manual that this is an option available in extenuating situations so that students struggling with adverse circumstances might ask their advisors if it would be appropriate for them. Alternatively, it could be eliminated as an option. As it stands, though, it is up to faculty to individually determine if they believe that a student is in need of this, and this introduces opportunities for bias and inequity.

The Department's Five Year Plan looks to address key student needs both within and beyond the program. To wit, they outline five actions (abbreviated from pp. 43-44):

1. Advocate better pay structure and career development trajectory for students
2. Make MA degree more affordable, balancing students' pace of self-development with timely graduation

3. Advocate for limited residency Creative Writing program to bring revenue, recruitment, opportunity, and prestige
4. Explore connecting with Music, Art, Nursing, and Counseling to create interdisciplinary medical humanities or ecocritical area
5. Explore possibility of community writing center

The Self-Study is resolute in its support for program alumni, refusing to accept the standard excuses for low pay and poor job prospects (p. 43). It would be interesting to learn what concrete steps that Department plans to undertake in furtherance of this goal. Similarly, I would appreciate details regarding making the MA more affordable. Programs across the Arts and Humanities, and even in the Social Sciences, could all benefit from such advocacy and affordability. Perhaps there are collaborative possibilities with other SSU departments, and/or with English departments at other CSUs.

The prospect of a community writing center is intriguing, and would be of a piece with the Department's long-standing "intellectual and institutional ties with the Sonoma State Writing Center dating back to 1997" (p. 44), as well as its association with The Sitting Room, a rather wonderful "non-profit women's library in Penngrrove, CA" (p. 45) that I hope is a resource much valued by MEP students. This would also be in line with the Department's active encouragement of student applications to the College of Marin's Faculty Diversity Internship Program. These campus and community outreach efforts are laudable, and it is encouraging to see the Department considering additional outreach efforts at a time when budgetary pressures are driving many programs to fold in upon themselves.

## **7. Conclusion**

Professor and former Chair Kiesbye describes the MEP as "the beating heart of the department." The MEP is, he argues, not only of value to the students enrolled in it. The program helps faculty, working in what is primarily a teaching institution, remain current in and energized about their own research. Further, MEP demonstrates for undergraduates that getting a bachelors need not be the final stage in their education, while modeling for them what the next stages of academic work look like. As Prof. Kiesbye phrases it, "the MA brings light into undergraduate studies... It is what connects the department to the larger world of academia, and gives the students a glimpse of how to take charge of their own interests in literature, and see their future as both scholars and teachers." This is all to say that the English Department as a whole — faculty, undergraduate students, and graduate students — have a vested interest in the survival and strengthening of the MEP. In practice, this would mean first and foremost the hiring of new faculty with expertise in English literary traditions outside of Britain, as well as in Creative Writing. These hires are needed not merely to fill out the ranks of the program. When the



impending retirements bring the TT/T faculty down to just four professors, the department will need more voices, more breath of interest and experience for students — graduate and undergraduate alike — to learn from. For comparison, here at Chico State (admittedly a larger campus), we have thirteen TT/T professors of English. CSU Humboldt, a considerably smaller campus than SSU, has nine TT/T professors of English, as does CSU Channel Islands, which is smaller still. Indeed, the smallest and most specialized campus in the system, CSU Maritime Academy — which has fewer than 900 students and does not even have an English Department — nonetheless has *six* TT/T professors who specialize in English language and literatures. (For enrollment data, see:

<https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu/facts-about-the-csu/enrollment>; for English Department faculty lists, see: <https://www.csuchico.edu/engl/faculty-staff/>; <https://english.humboldt.edu/faculty-staff>; <https://english.csuci.edu/faculty.htm>; <https://www.csum.edu/culture-and-communication/faculty/>)

I have been tasked with providing an External Program Review for the Masters in English Program. I have attempted to do so with careful attention to the *Graduate Program Review, Sonoma State University, Master of Arts in English (Self-Study)*; the interviews I have conducted with administrators, faculty, and students; and information I have gleaned from Department, SSU campus, and CSU-system websites. It is my considered assessment that the MEP is succeeding very well in creating a welcoming environment, and fostering a thoughtfully inclusive program, advancing pedagogies that are responsive to student needs and to the most important conversations happening in the Humanities. The program is, though, managing this in a period of very serious decline in faculty numbers, and concomitant increases in uncompensated work. This is, in my estimation, not sustainable. SSU is faced with a decision: does it recommit to the English Department, or does it allow a department with excellent faculty and satisfied students — a department that is often considered one of the cornerstones of academia in a way that I acknowledge my own field is not — to continue to wither, shrinking randomly by faculty attrition through retirements, to the point where the graduate program, *and the undergraduate majors it supports*, must fold under the strain?

While I am sure that my position on this is clear, let me nonetheless state it in unambiguous terms: Sonoma State University should recommit to the English Department, and to its undergraduate and graduate programs; this renewed commitment should be embodied in the launching of searches for tenure-track faculty. These new hires, if searches are framed appropriately, can be fully in concert with the University's Graduation Initiative 2025 and its status as an Hispanic Serving Institution. I hope to see the University taking on this project, in partnership with the English Department, in the very near future.