**English Undergraduate Program Review**

**Sonoma State University**

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**Introduction**

I would, first of all, like to thank all of the faculty, staff, students, and administrators with whom I met as part of this program review. Without exception, our conversations were informative, collegial, frank, and engaging. It was a pleasure to visit Sonoma State’s beautiful campus and interact with everyone as I learned more about the undergraduate English program.

My visit confirmed the importance of the English Department to both the Sonoma State campus and the larger community it serves. The department produces college graduates with the skills and talents cultivated by the English Department: graduates with effective written and oral communication, who can think critically and creatively, who can understand multiple perspectives, discover ambiguities, and pay close and sustained attention to detail.

Besides the value of its graduates to the community, the English Department provides a vital service to the university as a whole by supporting all SSU students in developing the written communication and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed academically across all disciplines and areas of study. Unlike most other departments on campus, English is a point of contact for first-time entering students, since all are required to take writing courses during their first year of enrollment. Retention statistics nationwide have long confirmed that the vast majority of students who drop out of higher education do so in their first year. As such, the English Department provides a pivotal source of support for SSU students during this crucial first year and is instrumental in helping the campus retain and graduate students in a timely manner.

At the outset of this report it is important to recognize the context in which Sonoma State is and has been operating. From 2017-2019, a number of wildfires caused periodic campus closures. These closures impacted the daily operations of campus, of course, but also caused physical, emotional, and psychological stress for faculty, students, and staff. In March of 2020 the COVID pandemic required the abrupt transition to online courses, and the campus is continuing to feel the effects of the pandemic three years later. Caused in part by these emergencies and exacerbated by declining enrollment figures, Sonoma State is also facing a significant budget shortage that is necessitating a comprehensive Academic Master Planning effort. These conditions make this program review report significantly more difficult to write, because budgets and possible changes to university structure are still unknown. I believe it is important to acknowledge these challenges and to understand the ways that the suggestions in this report may not be possible or advisable depending on the budget and university structure. Additionally, reports like these are always challenging because while an outsider’s perspective can illuminate issues unseen by insiders, they are also necessarily limited by the very perspective of an outsider. My comments below come from a position of great respect for the faculty in the program and I hope they find them useful.

**Selected Strengths of the English Department**

Without a doubt, the biggest strength of the English Department is its faculty. Undergraduate and graduate students alike praised the faculty for their knowledge, expertise, enthusiasm, and compassion. Additionally, they were grateful for the welcoming atmosphere created by the faculty, which facilitated students’ comfort in class, in office hours, and in campus conversations. I met with approximately 40 students, mostly undergraduates pursuing literature and creative writing tracks, for 50 minutes. Our lively conversation illuminated students’ deep admiration of their faculty; their appreciation for the individualized attention they received in the major; and their gratitude for the strong sense of community within the major. These are students who feel seen, heard, and included in the department. Especially given the tumultuous experiences of the recent past, the enthusiasm for the faculty and the department is remarkable to see.

In addition to supporting the students in generous and compassionate ways, the faculty in the department are outstanding teacher-scholars. I will not repeat the list of faculty accomplishments outlined in the self-study, but I do want to express my respect for the scholarly and creative output the department’s faculty has produced. The teaching load in the CSU is high, and forwarding one’s research and creative agenda can be difficult. Yet these faculty have managed to do so in meaningful and important ways.

Another real strength of this department is its collegiality. Though they have lost 53% of their tenure-line faculty over the past 15 years (a figure that is, quite frankly, astonishing to see), they continue to work together productively and fruitfully. Even more impressive is that the external challenges posed by wildfires and COVID have not seemed to significantly erode their department culture. Many departments across the CSU and nation have struggled to adjust to post-COVID life, but this department’s faculty does not seem to have suffered that fate, and it is inspiring and gratifying to know that their respect for one another has not diminished.

Though all of the faculty are performing extraordinarily well under the circumstances, the outstanding two newer faculty in the single subject program should be especially commended for their work in antiracist pedagogy. Dr. Jennifer Johnson and Dr. Theresa Burrell-Stone received a Teagle grant to research and implement antiracist interventions in the single subject curriculum (more on this later). Dr. Johnson and Dr. Burrell-Stone have also proposed and received funding for a Faculty Learning Community focused on antiracism. Like the other faculty in the department, they are engaged, active teacher-scholars who are committed to student success.

Students, too, are a real strength of this program. As mentioned above, I greatly enjoyed my meeting with students. They spoke passionately about their experiences in the major and at the institution, and they were knowledgeable about the ways the English major differed from other majors. I was especially impressed with students’ success in pursuing advanced degrees; one student I spoke with was headed to the PhD program at Ohio State, and other students were pursuing graduate degrees elsewhere.

Student graduation and persistence rates in the English major significantly outstrip those at the university. Especially laudatory is the English major’s 13% increase over the university’s four-year graduation rate (43% compared to 30%). That gap decreases, but is still meaningful, in six-year graduation rates (70% compared to 63%). I am also very impressed by the English major’s first-year persistence rate of 92%. These statistics should be noted by the university not just as numbers, but also as indicators of the careful curricular planning, individualized advising, and compassionate mentoring performed by English faculty.

**Opportunities for the English Department**

As mentioned in the Introduction, the conditions at Sonoma State are the direst I’ve seen. Given the small size of the faculty (there will be only 7 full-time tenure-line faculty working in fall 2023), the budget uncertainty, and the possible university restructuring, my ideas and suggestions may not be practical. Nevertheless, I would encourage the department and university to consider these opportunities to strengthen the already-strong English undergraduate program.

The self-study identified six plans of actions for the program review: 1) hire faculty; 2) reconsider the nature and structure of the overall major, especially with respect to commitments to diversity; 3) revisit plans for a low-residency MFA program; 4) improve assessment efforts; 5) develop the department’s social media and communication plans; and 6) close equity gaps in the first-year curriculum. I will reference these six goals within my recommendations below.

**Curriculum Revision**

The current major curriculum includes three tracks: literature (53 students), creative writing (82 students), and single subject (41 students). These three tracks and their student numbers reflect national trends, particularly with respect to student interest in creative writing. A serious challenge that the department faces is the need for a curriculum that serves all three tracks. Additionally, because the department is severely under-staffed (more on that later), it struggles to deliver the classes all three tracks need in order to graduate. This semester, for instance, two required courses (385 and 401) were merged in order to ensure that students could graduate on time.

The department is undergoing conversations about curricular revision right now (goal 2). In fact, on the day after my site visit the department held a faculty retreat to continue these discussions. I am sympathetic to the issues raised in these conversations and do not presume to have easy solutions to them, especially since I do not have the in-depth understanding of the curriculum that the SSU faculty do. What I can offer, however, are some suggestions for ways to think about curricular revision based on my understanding of the needs and desires of SSU English majors (as well as English majors in general).

* Are there ways to pursue cross-listing courses and/or team-teaching with faculty in other disciplines, such as Theatre, Modern Languages, American Multicultural Studies, etc.? One faculty member lamented that it had “always been difficult” to cross-list courses at SSU, and in my experience that can be true everywhere. Given the situation that the university finds itself in now, though, it seems like removing the structural barriers to cross-listing and team-teaching would be worth the investment of time and energy. The benefit of cross-listing is that it can expand options for students. Cross-listing seems especially beneficial since some of the department’s current faculty are teaching in other departments, most notably AMCS. I would also encourage the department to consider cross-listing with departments it may not typically think of. For instance, there might be a productive partnership between creative writing and computer science in a course on narrative game design. Or, something closer to home might be a team-taught course with the History department on the literature of World War I.
* If cross-listing and/or team-teaching aren’t options, would the department consider allowing a course from an outside field to be substituted for a course in the major? For instance, students indicated that there were literature courses offered in other departments (AMCS, for example) that they would be interested in taking. While I understand that allowing substitutions might reduce the number of classes taken in the English department, I think that allowing these substitutions, at least in the short-term, might be beneficial.
* Are there possibilities of expanding General Education courses to English majors? For instance, could some of the courses required in the literature track, especially, also serve GE students, thereby increasing the student numbers? There are differences in major and GE classes, to be sure, both in content and in expectations, but providing majors with the opportunity to take classes that meet GE for other students might expand their current options. Such a strategy might be especially beneficial for lower-division courses since they can be used as a recruiting tool for the major.
* The literature curriculum is fairly British-centric and skews towards pre-20th century. This reality is partly the effect of the current faculty specialties. Students expressed some frustration with the curricular offerings even while acknowledging the reasons for them. Obviously, the department can only teach what its faculty study, but I do wonder if the department has recently considered the Shakespeare requirement. Many English departments have moved away from single-author course requirements such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, for instance. If the department has recently considered the issue and decided to maintain the course, they should do so. But if they haven’t discussed it recently, they might wish to.
* As a result of the last program review the department added a course devoted to a distinct ethnic or cultural tradition. This is an excellent step towards diversifying the curriculum. Another way to do so, though, is to infuse non-canonical writers into all literature courses, especially the required two-course sequence in British and American literature. An equally important thing to share with students is that diversity isn’t only about race, ethnicity, and gender. Highlighting other identities such as disability and sexual orientation also introduces students to the diversity inherent in earlier periods.
* Another way to consider diversity in the curriculum is to continue the work that Drs. Johnson and Burrell-Stone began with their Teagle grant. Their work illustrates the importance of antiracist pedagogies and practices throughout the English curriculum.
* The low-residency MFA program mentioned in the self-study (goal 3) is a terrific aspirational goal for when the department has more bandwidth. Given the faculty numbers and the other curricular needs, I think now is probably not the time to engage in serious conversations about this program.

Each of the suggestions above has trade-offs such that the department may decide they aren’t worth pursuing. Until the department has a more robust tenure-line faculty, though, curricular revision is extremely challenging.

**Other Curricular Challenges**

The students I met with were mostly juniors and seniors in the creative writing and literature tracks. A frequently cited concern was their lack of confidence in their writing skills. Students in both tracks asked for more writing practice and feedback, claiming that in most of their major courses they composed one final essay at the end of the term and so didn’t feel like their writing was improving. They expressed concerns about their ability to perform in graduate programs and in their future careers since English majors are supposed to be known for their writing skills.

As the department faculty know, though, responding to writing is an incredibly time-consuming endeavor. I understand how difficult it is to respond to multiple pieces of writing throughout the term, especially when class sizes are large (there were 40 students in the class session I attended). I wasn’t able to discuss this issue with the faculty, and I’m confident they are aware of and have explored best practices for responding to student writing, but I wanted to mention it here because the students were quite vocal about it.

**Faculty Hiring**

This is the department’s top priority (goal 1) and I completely concur. The department as a whole is in dire need of more faculty. I recognize that it is *de rigueur* for program reviewers to request additional hires. However, in my experience conducting program reviews, I have not encountered a faculty as depleted as this one. While I recognize that all departments at SSU have struggled over the past several years of crisis, the SSU English Department seems to have borne more than its fair share of loss. In 2006, the department boasted 15 tenure-line faculty; in fall of 2023 they will be down to 7 full-time tenure-line faculty, with an additional two who are FERPing and thus part-time. This reduction has meant that the department has been unable to offer key aspects of its curriculum, including American literature and Composition/Rhetoric courses. As referenced above, curriculum development and faculty hiring go hand-in-hand, so the department does need to prioritize its requests for hiring.

The department’s self-study expresses a need for at least three to four positions: 20th/21st century American literature; creative writing (possibly two lines); and composition and rhetoric. All of these positions are critical to the success of the program and its students. Given the student demand, it may be that the creative writing hire is the most vital, at least at first. One suggestion might be to advertise for a creative writing expert who can also teach 20th/21st century American literature (in their genre or across the board). Our campus has had good luck with that approach; neither of our creative writing faculty teaches only creative writing. That approach might help stem the tide in the short term.

The other area I would encourage the department and university to prioritize is the composition/rhetoric position. Because of Megan McIntyre’s departure, the position of Writing Program Director has been held by a faculty member with a specialty in literature, not composition and rhetoric. Given the importance of this position not only to the English Department, but also to the entire university, the Writing Program Director should have a PhD in composition and rhetoric or in writing studies. Prioritizing this faculty position would help ensure that writing program faculty have the support they need and would benefit all SSU students. Additionally, it would enable the department to make significant headway in goal 6, closing equity gaps in first-year writing (more on that goal below).

I want to reiterate that *all* of these positions are critically needed. I hope that the university will provide the support and resources to enable the department to find the equilibrium it needs to continue as an indispensable asset to students, the campus, and the wider community.

**Tenure-line Faculty Workload**

Unsurprisingly, given the reduction in tenure-line faculty over the past several years, faculty workload has increased. The self-study references it especially with respect to assessment efforts (which are still in the beginning stages), but also with respect to committee work and service to the university. I mention it here because I want to be sure that the university understands the tremendous burden on these faculty to perform all of the service required to maintain and deliver their programs. Additionally, I want to be sure that SSU English faculty are aware of the Assigned Time for Exceptional Service to Students program (article 20.37 of the Unit 3 Collective Bargaining Agreement). This program may provide some support for the excellent work faculty do to support students, especially those from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds.

**Student Advising**

Students complimented the department for making them feel welcome and part of the community, and the department’s student advising model is undoubtedly partly responsible for creating that feeling. However, students also raised concerns about two advising issues: a difficulty planning their schedules because the catalog isn’t reflective of course offerings in a given year, and a desire for more career advising from faculty.

*Course Planning*

The catalog issue is a common one that is likely out of the department’s control. The catalog lists “terms typically offered” for courses, but the crisis in English department staffing has meant that some courses aren’t being offered. Students indicated that the department schedule typically listed courses one semester at a time rather than projecting for two semesters, which they would find more useful. I understand the difficulties in publishing course offerings a full year in advance (that is, spring 2024 posted in spring 2023), but I would encourage the department to consider doing so on its website and making clear the “tentative” nature of the offerings. Doing so might help students plan more effectively and help them feel more in control of their degree progress.

*Career Advising*

Students definitely want more help in this area, and not from the Career Services office (though they are aware of that office). Instead, they would like help more directly related to English careers and options. This request has become a common one from English majors, and it can be time-consuming, but ultimately very rewarding, to address. I have two suggestions the department might pursue.

1. Establish an Advisory Board of alumni and other interested constituents (including non-SSU English graduates in the local area). Advisory Boards can be helpful in a number of ways: they can help with fundraising, with outreach to prospective students, and with career advising. Given SSU’s location, alumni would probably jump at the chance to come to campus once or twice a year for meetings. I formed an Advisory Board twelve years ago; I would be happy to talk at more length about the process and the benefits we’ve reaped.
2. Establish a Career Connections program designed to showcase career options for English majors. There are multiple ways to enact this program ranging from a digital-only program (website linking to career research/programs), to a LinkedIn group with SSU English alumni, to in-person events like resume workshops and Speed Networking events. If the department has the bandwidth to engage in any of these ideas I am more than happy to talk with them.

**Lecturer Faculty**

The department currently has twelve lecturer faculty, many of whom teach at other institutions, as well. For the most part, these faculty teach in the first-year writing program, though occasionally they are asked to teach literature and creative writing courses. One common concern was the lack of clear guidelines about how courses are assigned. The impression is that the qualifications for different classes vary from department chair to department chair. Additionally, lecturers feel undervalued for the work they do to recruit and retain students both in the department and at the institution. Despite being the first point of contact for first-time freshmen, the lecturers feel like the department and university leadership don’t involve them in conversations about retention and best practices. Finally, though the lecturers expressed fondness for the department’s tenure-line faculty as individuals, they feel a lack of community and support in general.

None of the concerns raised by the lecturers are ones particular to SSU, unfortunately. Every English department I know has lecturers voicing similar concerns. Their universality, however, doesn’t mean they can’t be addressed on some level. I have a few suggestions that might help, but I also recognize that there are many other issues at play here: entitlements; the unpredictability of course needs, especially as the university struggles with enrollment issues; degree requirements for various course levels; and the lack of compensation for service. Nevertheless, I offer these suggestions in the spirit of helping the department and university find ways to better support these faculty.

1. One of the concerns is around invisibility and exclusion, particularly with respect to research and teaching that lecturers are doing. Post-COVID life has made in-person meetings more challenging, but I would suggest having at least two meetings/semester in person and inviting all faculty to attend. The department could devote 30 minutes of the meeting to hearing about innovative teaching practices and/or exciting research ideas from faculty interested in sharing, including lecturer faculty.
2. Similarly, the department chair could send monthly emails highlighting these sorts of accomplishments and activities, a Monthly Kudos of sorts. If the chair doesn’t have the time to do so, perhaps the social media/department communications student intern could share these. In order for this approach to be successful, though, faculty have to be willing to share their teaching/research updates—the chair isn’t a mind reader. This sort of email/communication would also help with the department’s goal 5.
3. The department should consider establishing some basic guidelines for determining qualifications to teach different kinds of classes. For example, perhaps an MA or MFA is required to teach lower-division literature courses, but a PhD is required to upper-division courses. It’s possible that such guidelines already exist, but if they do, the lecturers are not aware of them.
4. The self-study indicates that one way the department hopes to help close the equity gaps in first-year writing (goal six) is by partnering with University Academic Program to support new grants and initiatives to increase student success and retention in the first year. The self-study also reports that paid professional development opportunities will be available for the composition instructions to reflect on hidden barriers to success. I encourage the university administrators reading this report to ensure that this work is compensated, especially since it will be performed by lecturer faculty who are not paid to perform service. Additionally, I want to reiterate the Assigned Time for Exceptional Service to Students program mentioned above; lecturers are also eligible for those WTUs.

**Faculty Support**

In general, faculty (tenure-line and lecturer) feel overworked and under-supported, especially with respect to research, scholarship, and creative activities. Many faculty mentioned the teaching resources offered by the Center for Teaching & Educational Technology (CTET), but they indicated that those resources were aimed at faculty with less teaching experience and pedagogical expertise than English faculty. Consequently, they felt that the support was not relevant or current for their needs. Instead of resources for supporting teaching, the faculty indicated that they need resources that support research. I am not sure what can be done with respect to this support right now, but I mention it here because it was expressed as a very serious need for faculty. In my meetings with interim dean Ed Beebout and AVP Stacey Bosick, both expressed an admiration for the faculty in the department and a desire to retain them. While appreciation doesn’t pay the bills, I want to memorialize their sentiments in this report so that faculty know they are valued.

Another way the college and university can support faculty is through meaningful consultation and clear and timely communication regarding the Academic Master Planning efforts. Faculty expressed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about what will happen to their departments, schools, and professional lives. And there is a sense that the administration is making decisions without real consultation. I encourage the university administration to be attentive to these concerns because the English faculty are likely not the only ones feeling this way.

**Goal 4: Improve assessment efforts**

The department’s assessment efforts are in nascent stages, but that is largely because of the faculty numbers. They have program learning outcomes and have done some curricular mapping. While I understand the importance of assessment, given the current situation in the department, I would suggest they focus their attention on more pressing issues.

**Goal 5: Develop the department’s social media and communication plans**

The self-study lists this as a goal that it has already begun addressing. This spring, department chair Tim Wandling created an internship opportunity for a student to serve as a social media intern. I think this is a terrific idea and it is one that has worked well at Cal Poly, SLO. In addition to social media content, though, a student or students could produce department and alumni newsletters, revamp the department’s website, and help with the career programming the students have requested. Internships like this one are terrific opportunities for students to gain experience and have a product they can use for job-seeking upon graduation.

**Goal 6: Close equity gaps in first-year writing**

This goal is referenced above but deserves more attention. The department’s former tenure-line Writing Program Director produced a series of recommendations to address these gaps, and the department is partnering with Academic Programs to implement them. One example of an intervention is to use embedded tutors in first-year writing classes. This approach has been quite successful elsewhere and will likely be successful at SSU, as well. As the department works to close the equity gaps I encourage it to be attentive to the issues raised above: the need for a disciplinary expert to lead these efforts and a recognition that lecturer faculty teach the majority of these classes. It will be important to meaningfully recognize and compensate these faculty for the work they do to achieve these goals.

**Conclusion**

I hope the preceding suggestions can help the English Department continue to succeed. I want to end by returning to the praise I opened with: I was incredibly impressed with the faculty, staff, and students in the department and wish them every success as they navigate these challenging waters.