

Academic Program Review  
Department of English  
University of New Mexico  
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## **Introduction**

Before the site visit (February 22-24, 2010), the Department of English sent the review team members a helpful 324-page self-study document. This self-study is one of the most comprehensive we have seen, and we commend the Department of English for providing such a detailed and insightful report. On campus we met with many people who provided further insights into the department—university, college, and department administrators; tenure-line faculty; lecturers; part-time instructors; teaching assistants; staff; and graduate and undergraduate students. These people talked freely with us, and many of them provided additional documents describing activities in the Department of English. We thank and commend everyone who helped to inform us.

## **I. Selected Strengths of the UNM English Department**

During our brief stay we noted many strengths within the UNM Department of English; a more extended stay would undoubtedly lead to more. Here are some highlights:

The faculty are dedicated and hard-working teachers, with an overall orientation that is student centered. Students described the faculty as approachable and encouraging and interested in them as individuals. Most graduate students praised the faculty for being dedicated teachers and inspiring mentors.

The faculty are productive scholars committed to their creative and scholarly work.

The department has obviously done an excellent job hiring in recent years, as evidenced by the strong group of assistant professors.

Equally important, the department has been very successful in mentoring assistant professors, and we were especially impressed both by the appointment of the new associate chair for tenure and promotion and the work this person has already accomplished.

Although the department could certainly use additional staff members (given its size and wide ranging activities), we heard considerable praise for current staff members. Relations between staff and students and staff and faculty are excellent, with students and faculty describing the staff as knowledgeable, hard working, and helpful.

The English department has a strong reputation for its training of graduate students as teachers, a reputation that seems very much well deserved.

While there are accomplished faculty in many different fields, there is collective strength in the following areas: rhetoric and writing, creative writing, nineteenth-century studies, and Southwest Studies.

The English department has an exceptional record of innovative internships and community-based projects, details of which we found throughout the self-study report. Some examples include the world-class Taos Summer Writers Conference, the Write On Workshops, and the impressive work done with local nonprofit organizations within the grant-writing course.

Among the faculty we spoke with, we found strong (even if not unanimous) support for the department chair Gail Houston. Although she is only in her first year (and is working under some challenging circumstances), she has made considerable progress already, and her efforts are generally much appreciated by the faculty.

## **II. Challenges and Opportunities**

As with any department, we also noted some areas of concern and/or opportunities for improvement.

### **A. Core Writing Program**

Because the Core Writing program at UNM reflects current theory, research, and practice in the field, students in English 101 and 102 develop foundational skills and knowledge that serve them well in their academic lives. In English 219 and 220, students are offered opportunities to develop their repertoires further. In all of these courses, students learn to think and act as skilled, knowledgeable writers. Faculty and administrators in the program also take seriously their responsibilities to assess student learning outcomes, using practices recommended by professional organizations such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

The Department of English takes great pride in helping students to become effective writers, but there do not appear to be adequate financial resources to sustain high levels of quality in the program. Because funding does not seem to follow the production of student credit hours at UNM, programs such as Core Writing have not received funding increases that parallel the growth of enrollment in their courses.

To address concerns about support for Core Writing, we offer the following suggestions:

One possibility is to allow students to take courses that substitute for English 102. To make that possible, other departments at UNM could propose courses that have learning outcomes similar to those in English 102. Although we have no way of knowing how many departments would propose offering substitutes for English 102, the university could facilitate conversations about that possibility. Although there are concerns about quality control of writing instruction offered in units other than English, the Rhetoric and Writing faculty indicated a willingness to work with colleagues in other departments to ensure that students experience high quality instruction in writing. The option of inviting other units to share the load of offering the Core Writing curriculum may not do much to reduce the costs, but it will alleviate the heavy, inadequately funded burden that English has had to bear. The university could help the Department of English reduce its burden for core writing by making resources available to those departments willing to share the load.

Another option, which will not save much money but which will enhance students' writing repertoires, is to eliminate the requirement that students take English 102. Instead, UNM could develop a vertical program that includes writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID). Such a program would begin with the solid introduction to academic writing that students encounter in English 101. Then students could enroll in a WAC course in any discipline at UNM. Following that, students could enroll in one or more (the more the better) WID courses in their majors. WID courses, taught by faculty in the major, are crucial for students because faculty in the disciplines know the discourse conventions of their disciplines better than faculty who are not in those disciplines. Rhetoric and Writing faculty are familiar with discourse conventions in some disciplines, but it is unreasonable to expect them to know the full range of discursive practices in the many fields at a large university such as UNM.

One of the documents that we received during our visit is titled "WAC at UNM: Goals & Background, 2005-2009." That report indicates that Rhetoric and Writing faculty, especially Michelle Hall Kells and Chuck Paine, have worked with many colleagues to develop solid momentum for a WAC and WID program at UNM. By continuing the kinds of efforts described in this document, UNM has the opportunity to help students develop a fuller range of writing skills and knowledge that will serve them throughout their lives. We know that some nationally respected WAC/WID experts (e.g., Chris Anson, Linda Adler-Kassner) have already visited campus, and they could certainly assist in developing a WAC/WID program at UNM. Other nationally known scholars could also assist. For example, Martha Townsend has worked with her colleagues at the University of Missouri to develop a widely respected and highly effective program. However, there is also great expertise and leadership among the Rhetoric and Writing

faculty at UNM. For a WAC/WID program to succeed, expert and committed leaders on campus will need to be available over the long run to assist faculty in all colleges as they develop effective curriculum and pedagogy for enhancing students' writing. Faculty need ongoing support.

## **B. Morale**

While the faculty, students, and staff of the Department of English are generally enthusiastic about the mission of the department, the quality of its programs, and the experiences they have had learning and teaching, morale in the department has been negatively affected by the following factors:

Loss of faculty in key positions through retirements, resignations, budget cuts as well as through the appointment of individual faculty members in administrative appointments outside the English department. That these reductions are occurring at the same time that student enrollment is increasing heightens the pressure on the department to fulfill its teaching mission. Some areas within the department have been hit especially hard, and the department is at risk of losing some of its historic strengths because of lost faculty lines. Similar losses in other departments (e.g., History) have also further weakened some areas within the department (most notably Medieval Studies). These losses have seriously eroded faculty morale. (Reviewing this paragraph in the wake of the tragic death of Hector Torres makes us painfully aware of the department's traumatic loss of yet another colleague, and we express our condolences to the department's faculty and students and to the larger university community.)

An overall sense that the English department is not valued on campus. Faculty sense that the campus as a whole sees the English department as a "service" unit rather than a viable academic program with strong research and teaching. At the same time, many faculty expressed their belief that the department's service to the university is not fully appreciated on campus.

The traumatic incidents in the Creative Writing Program in 2007-2008. Although much of the department is committed to "moving forward," a number of faculty members continue to feel deeply hurt and concerned about these events. Most junior faculty and graduate students do not seem directly affected—a real credit to the department—but the department continues to struggle with the residual effects of these incidents.

Some graduate students remarked that they would like to see a better sense of community among faculty. Students find it very stressful to hear faculty members disparage each other, especially when they feel caught in the crossfire between members of their exam and dissertation committees.

To address concerns about morale, we offer the following suggestions:

The department needs clarification about the budget implications when faculty members take administrative positions outside the department. We heard conflicting information about

whether any salary savings were offered to the department in such situations, and we urge the Dean to work closely with the department to clarify this confusion. If the department does receive salary savings, we encourage the department to use such funds to support additional upper-division courses (rather than first-year writing). Faculty losses due to administrative appointments outside the department are most keenly felt at the upper-division level, and making clear that additional courses are available may alleviate faculty concern in such situations. At the same time we urge the faculty to see such administrative appointments as opportunities for the department. It never hurts to have a colleague in the dean's office or the provost's office, and we urge the department to see such promotions as events to be proud of.

One of the concerns about upper administration that we heard was that some faculty have submitted proposals to various campus-wide initiatives but have never received any sort of response. For hard-working faculty committed to making improvements (even in the face of declining resources), this is extremely demoralizing, and it clearly discourages faculty from pursuing other opportunities. We urge the chair and the dean to act as advocates on behalf of faculty in such situations so as to insure that all proposals are carefully considered and that faculty receive appropriate notice.

The English department needs to do a better job of communicating its research strengths to the entire campus. Much of the public discussion about the English department in recent years has been fairly negative and has emphasized things that the department has lost. While not ignoring these real losses, we urge the department to promote another—equally true—narrative of successes.

Because Creative Writing and Rhetoric and Writing have experienced especially difficult losses, we urge the dean to meet with the faculty in these two areas (in two separate meetings) so that she can better understand the pressures facing faculty in these areas and their plans and hopes for the future.

The dean should also insure that university-wide publicity features some of the outstanding initiatives, faculty, and students within the English department. The fabulous community-outreach projects, for instance, would make a wonderful feature for an alumni magazine or on a university website.

While resources are obviously limited at the moment, the university should identify someone responsible for crafting a long-term plan for the restoration of the D. H. Lawrence Ranch, which is a great asset to the university and the state. Once a long-term renovation plan (and budget) is in place, the college should make the ranch a fundraising opportunity. There is definite interest in the ranch throughout the nation (and even internationally), and the university should seek the necessary private funding to make renovation a reality.

### C. Curriculum

While we were generally very impressed with the quality of teaching in the department, we do have some concerns about the curriculum and we also have some ideas about curricular opportunities.

Some observations and concerns:

One area of concern is the heavy reliance on part-time instructors. It's not at all unusual for English departments to rely on contingent faculty in lower-division courses, but we were concerned about the apparent use of PTI's in upper-division courses. Remedying this situation will, of course, require significant resources, but it is essential if the department is to continue as a strong academic unit.

Another significant area of concern, which virtually every faculty member already recognizes, is that the department is trying to do too much with too few faculty. This problem results not only from the loss of faculty lines but also from the fact that the field of English studies continues to expand with new areas added all the time—film studies, Asian American literature, queer theory, to name just a few. Virtually every English department we know struggles with this issue of trying to provide “coverage” of historical literary fields, while also providing students access to the more recent developments. The bottom line is that every English department—and especially undersized ones like UNM—must make difficult decisions, recognizing that they can't “cover” everything.

This problem of trying to cover too much with too few faculty manifests itself in a number of significant ways in the curriculum. We noticed, for instance, that the overall curricular culture is that the various areas within the department—Rhetoric and Writing, Creative Writing, American Literary Studies, British and Irish Literary Studies, and Medieval Studies—are actually competing with each other for limited resources.

We also observed that the concentrations/emphasis areas within the graduate and undergraduate programs are not at all aligned. Having separate tracks for graduate and undergraduate students isn't necessarily a bad thing, but we do wonder whether the department might create a greater coherence and focus by aligning these two large parts of the curriculum. Such a re-alignment might also give undergraduate students greater access to and awareness of the existing research strengths within the faculty.

One effort to manage “coverage” at the graduate level—the “slash” courses that combine graduate with undergraduates in one classroom—seems to be particularly unpopular with graduate students, who complained that the experience often fell short of their expectations for graduate level work. While the practice of allowing graduate students access (for credit) to courses that could not otherwise be available to them, if employed selectively, can enrich their studies, a significant proportion of such courses on a student's transcript should signal that the department cannot actually support graduate work in a given field with its current faculty.

The heavy teaching load for graduate students is another area of concern. Having to teach two courses a semester seriously limits time for TAs' own coursework and research. While your graduate students recognize that their extensive and multifaceted teaching experience is often key to their finding jobs, having taught 12 courses would likely suffice as well as having taught 24. This heavy teaching load has a direct impact on students' sense of their place within the English department. While graduate students praised faculty mentoring and conscientious support of their professionalization, a few remarked that they felt the program emphasized their role as teachers more than their development as scholars.

The stipends provided for graduate students also need improvement, and Dean of the Graduate School, Amy Wohlert, requested that we include some comparative data regarding graduate stipends. Many English departments pay between \$5,000 and \$6,000 per course, which allows graduate students to teach three or sometimes even two classes a year rather than UNM's four per year. At UNC Chapel Hill, for example, graduate students currently earn \$14,700 a year, teaching only one course per semester. (Some students teach a third course at a lower rate, \$4,000.) Raising additional funds for graduate support should be a priority for the department.

Additional suggestions:

The department should seriously consider re-organizing its areas/groups so as to allow more collaboration across the existing areas. One possibility is to focus on three groups: Rhetoric and Writing, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies. Even with such an organization, however, the department should seek structures and practices that make these different areas more fluid. The department is already considering, for example, having some faculty in Rhetoric and Writing contribute to Creative Writing. This might be a model for other collaborations across areas. One of the advantages of combining ALS and BILS, for instance, is that the department could capitalize on its very real strengths in nineteenth-century studies. There is a critical mass of faculty in this area that could be featured more prominently, particularly in light of the current scholarly emphasis on transatlantic studies.

We also see potential in more focused connections between Medieval Studies and Renaissance literature. Although Medieval Studies is historically a strength within the department, there are now only two faculty in the field, a reduction accompanied by significant attrition in related areas in other departments. Because graduate students from this department are likely to get jobs that require them to teach a variety of courses, we see only advantages to connecting Medieval Studies and Renaissance literature.

The department should also seriously reconsider its undergraduate requirements, which at times depend on a fairly traditional notion of "coverage." Given the strengths of the department, for instance, should students (depending on the specific concentration) be required to take a Shakespeare class and either Milton or Chaucer? Rather than assume that the department must continue to require the same things it has always required, we encourage the department to ask, "Given the faculty strengths we have, what kind of coherent major should we be offering our students?" Faculty might also encourage other units to reconsider their own requirements, as

they affect the English department. The fact that Shakespeare is a required course for students in Theatre, Education, and English, for example, places enormous demands on the curriculum and limits the department's abilities to explore other possibilities.

Several graduate students asked that the department pay more attention to spreading graduate courses across the hours of the day to maximize student opportunities to take the courses they need and want. Perhaps a curriculum committee could oversee the schedule.

We were impressed by the serious attention to outcomes assessment in the undergraduate program. Information was more limited with regard to the graduate program, however, and we suggest it would be useful to collect data on the quality of and student satisfaction with graduate courses and on the post-degree experience of graduate students who do not accept academic appointments in colleges and universities.

Some graduate students observed that they would like more of the writing assignments in their courses to support their professional goals (drafting conference presentations or sections of dissertations).

Finally we strongly recommend that the department proceed to establish a Southwestern Studies emphasis, perhaps at the MA level.

#### **D. Capitalizing on what is unique to UNM and the region**

The foregoing recommendation relates to our sense that as a key humanities department in the premier state university, the English department should think more intently about how to connect meaningfully with students, regional alumni, and citizens of the state by capitalizing on what is unique to UNM and the area. Instead of just one more graduate program that tries to cover everything, yours could become the nation's premier department for Southwestern, Chicana/o, and Native American studies. And at the undergraduate level, increased offerings in these areas could make the study of literature an exceptionally meaningful, even transformative experience, perhaps attracting students into other areas of literary study as well.

In building on resources across other departments as well as the region's history and contemporary culture, the department's emphasis on Southwestern Studies could also help establish a strong donor base that would enrich all aspects of your work.

Emphasizing links between Southwestern Studies and the department's dynamic program in Creative Writing, which numbers some of the nation's premier Native American and Chicana/o and distinctively Southwestern writers on its roster of past and current students and teachers, would further underscore the special nature of UNM's English department and invite donor support. The Creative Writing program's sponsoring high profile visitors from afar draws huge crowds; their regular readings in local coffee shops also connect the local community to the department and university in meaningful ways. Linking both endeavors to what goes on in literature courses would firmly locate the English department at the center of New Mexico's



widely famed arts communities. Like the renowned Taos Writers Conference, the D.H. Lawrence Ranch should become an exceptional resource, and as we mentioned earlier, refurbishing it should become a fundraising priority of the College of Arts and Sciences and the university at large.

### **E. Hiring**

As noted elsewhere in this document, the Department of English is not adequately staffed to sustain all of its admirable efforts to offer first-rate courses and programs. There is a need for more tenure-line faculty to teach and mentor graduate students and upper-division students in the major, to help enhance retention and graduation rates, to maintain the national research visibility of the department and UNM, and to fulfill the many service obligations in the department.

In particular, the Department of English can maximize the impact of its hiring by focusing on potential opportunities described earlier. In particular, strategic hiring could help to build strengths in Southwest/border studies, which seems like a logical focus for UNM. Such a focus could become a beacon for the residents of New Mexico.

Also, given the strength of the programs in Rhetoric and Writing and in Creative Writing, these are areas that could easily develop ever greater visibility with several key hires.

To help guide hiring decisions, the Department of English would benefit from surveying alumni, employers who hire alumni, and graduate programs that admit alumni to determine what skills and knowledge serve English students as they enter the job market or graduate school.

### **F. Other**

In light of the serious shortfall in faculty positions in relation to the growing student population, the Chair might re-think the number of course releases associated with departmental administrative positions. While recognizing that in most instances, time is more precious to our colleagues than the monetary stipends awarded for directing programs, it nonetheless seems that course releases for some of the departmental administrators are more generous than those at comparable universities—most especially in light of the conspicuous pressures on classroom teaching at this moment. While it seems critically important for the Director of the Rhetoric and Writing program to have a course release each semester, given the size and complexity of the program, the Chair might review whether directing the programs in Graduate Studies, Undergraduate Studies, and Creative Writing warrants more than one course release per year.

We were asked to offer suggestions for mentoring junior faculty in the Department of English so that the responsibility is shared more widely. We note that some universities have established networks of mentors across department and colleges. In such cases, there may be a subject-area mentor in the department, but senior faculty in other departments also help junior faculty navigate the process of preparing for the tenure review. In some cases the university

administrator who oversees the tenure reviews will offer another form of mentoring by conducting annual workshops for junior faculty to help them understand the expectations and processes for earning tenure.

Thank you for asking us to review the UNM Department of English. We all came away with a profound respect for your faculty, staff, and students, and for the energy, ambition, and accomplishment everywhere evident in your department. We also came away with ideas for adapting your initiatives and practices in our own departments. We hope our observations and suggestions prove helpful as you move to the next phase of your internal review.