

**UMBC English Department Academic Program Review**  
**External Reviewers' Report**  
**May 1-3, 2016**  
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**A. Goals and Objectives**

Since its last review, the English department has committed substantial time and effort to responding to the recommendations of its 2009 review. It carefully examined and reformed its curriculum and reshaped its mission to better meet the needs of its students and its role in the greater context of UMBC. We comment below on some specific ways in which they are meeting their goals and objectives. Overall, the faculty have begun a strategic planning process to set a course for the future. While as the self study indicates, none of the ideas included there has been “fully vetted or formally voted on,” they indicate that they are setting new goals that will build on their current strengths in composition studies, digital humanities, creative writing, and interdisciplinary studies, which would strengthen both undergraduate and graduate education and create more ties to other programs and departments at UMBC.

**B. Student Perceptions**

*Literature*

Students commended the faculty for their accessibility and overall expertise as advisers, particularly because advisors must sign off on registration holds. Students mentioned faculty frequently remaining after class to address general questions about courses and degree progress.

This representative group shared a number of concerns, particularly the need for access to additional diversity offerings, including World and Asian-American literature; the need for more breadth of readings in particular courses (as opposed to faculty favorites); the need for stronger communication between English and Education; and the need for more opportunities in junior and senior level courses to apply theoretical frames learned in English 302.

Graduating seniors felt prepared for master’s level work in part because of their honors thesis work, while others had less of a sense of their career aspirations at this stage of their degree progress. They noted the English Department’s sharing via email of internship opportunities and appreciated any efforts the Department took to explain what possibilities exist with an English degree, but felt that they often had to seek out such information. Later in this report we recommend that the department undertake more organized efforts in career education and mentoring,

*Communication and Technology*

We did not have the opportunity to speak with students in the Communication and Technology (CT) track so cannot comment on their perceptions.

### *Graduate Program*

We met with three students in the MA in Texts, Technologies and Literature, one of whom served as a Graduate Assistant and two self-funded students. Each was very enthusiastic about the program goals and was able to tailor projects in courses to their research interests and career goals. They commented positively on both the quality of instruction and advising, and how they wanted careers as college educators. They praised the innovation of the program, and the quality of training to teach first-year writing. One concern raised was the extent to which the innovative features of the program (including the ability to produce multimodal texts such as websites and podcasts) would mesh with more traditional graduate programs in English and thus disadvantage them as they applied for doctoral programs. When asked about the cross-listed structure between graduate and undergraduates in Master's course offerings, the students noted the quality and contribution of undergraduates. Nevertheless, the program must work to recruit students and grow the program to ensure more standalone master's classes. Additionally, the program should work with the College to support more graduate assistantships as this will positively impact recruitment, time to degree, and likely success in doctoral program placement.

#### **C. Consistency of Mission**

All the faculty and students we met were very proud to be part of UMBC and expressed commitment to its mission as "a dynamic public research university integrating teaching, research and service to benefit the citizens of Maryland." They understand and work hard to balance those three elements of their work. A department of English is a cornerstone of any strong College of Arts and Sciences, both for education and research, and this department lives up to that role. This department of English also understands the role it must play in the context of the overall identity of UMBC, as a university with a focus on science, engineering and IT and a commitment to service to the state and region. This understanding is reflected, for example, in the curricular emphasis on communications and technology. Their plans for the growth of the program, in hiring new faculty working in rhetoric and composition and the digital humanities, is consistent with this commitment. We are in fact concerned that, with their current faculty, they really do not have the capacity to either sustain or move forward in this area as they and the University administration might wish.

The University mission statement also asserts that "UMBC is dedicated to cultural and ethnic diversity," and the department certainly shares that commitment as well. We are concerned that right now the department faculty is nowhere near as diverse as the student body. This is one of the reasons why we recommend below that the department be authorized to make a new hire in multi-ethnic/postcolonial literature, where the pool of faculty of color is relatively deep. This hire would also increase the department's ability to offer courses in newer areas that the students would like to take.

#### **D. Curricular Quality**

We offer our comments on the curriculum in the section responding to the department's questions.

#### **E. Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

The English Department takes assessment seriously, engaging in ongoing, multiple methods of data collection to determine the extent to which its students are meeting general learning outcomes. These methods include paper evaluations, student surveys, and exit interviews, and the department is to be

commended for fostering rigorous evaluation standards. Based on the assessment reporting processes between 2012-2014, there is evidence that while the majority of students are meeting or exceeding expectations, the numbers of those who do not meet expectations is cause for concern. For example, in its 2014 report of English Arts and Humanities courses, the department notes that 19 percent (n=9 of 46) did not meet expectations in the area of critical thinking. Similar levels exist in the ability to apply theory and conduct literary analysis. The department is clearly aware of these trends and has identified particular strategies for improving student performance, including consistency and visibility of learning outcomes in both syllabi and the curriculum itself. More information is needed about how various shifts in the literature curriculum have impacted student performance. In the case of CT, there may be a connection between the lack of faculty numbers (given recent or impending departures) and the ability to deliver some aspects of the curriculum to help students meet various outcomes, including the ability to work across various communicative media. Indeed, faculty expressed concern that the ability to cover courses while at the same time developing new topics/offerings was an ongoing challenge. While there is an assessment plan, the APR documentation does not delineate a clear process for closing the loop. Moreover, in light of the diversity concerns expressed in the APR, the department should consider the extent to which it might revise its outcomes to reflect more multicultural and technological goals in ways that will shape future curricular modifications.

#### **F. Scholarly Work and Growth**

Currently the department is unusual in its relatively large number of associate professors, with three full professors, three assistant professors (soon to be two), and seven associate professors (in addition there are two Professors of the Practice). (We understand that two of the associate professors are on the track to be promoted soon to full professor.) We were very impressed with both the quality and the quantity of the scholarly work of the faculty at all levels; there is no “dead wood” in this very hard-working and creative group. All of them are making important contributions to their fields of study, publishing in the best venues and are well-connected nationally and internationally, and we hope that the College and the University recognize and will publicize the value of this scholarship and tremendous creativity (we did get a sense that the faculty felt that the quality and impact of their research are not sufficiently acknowledged on a campus where priority is given to grant-funded research).

The sabbatical support offered to tenure-track faculty conforms to that of comparable institutions (research leave for assistant professors, semester of sabbatical or year off at half pay after six years), and the support provided for travel to conferences, etc. seems quite satisfactory. We did hear some significant discontent from the associate professors about the 2/3 teaching load (while they are all very dedicated teachers): they feel that this really makes it very difficult for them to get their research done during the academic year (they pointed to comparable humanities departments that do have a 2/2 load, and they feel this disparity is unfair). Many faculty do get course reductions through service, but the allocation of those benefits can also cause some strife. We could not determine whether the curriculum could be supported with a change in the teaching load; we would, however, suggest that the department explore the option of having a floating one-course reduction, which could rotate among the faculty (for which they would have to have a specific project they would want to accomplish).

The undergraduate and graduate students seem to be offered ample opportunities to pursue research at this time (and the faculty has the incentive to supervise student research because such supervisions can be counted toward an eventual course release).

## **G. Program Resources**

Overall, the department administration seems to be make judicious use of the existing resources allocated to them, while the self-study makes it clear that they see it as a real challenge to operate at the existing level. The department needs assurances that they will be not be penalized for their demonstrated fiscal prudence. We should note that the current chair is generally admired, and overall the faculty seem to think the department is run very efficiently. We did not feel we could comment on the specifics or the mechanics of the budgetary requests (other than to note elsewhere that we would encourage the College to find a way to fund additional graduate assistantships that would not be dependent on the use of rollover funds).

We did encourage the department to think about developing certificate programs that are well matched to their current offerings, which could function as a means of generating revenue. For example, with sufficient new expertise in this area, the department could (perhaps in collaboration with other programs) offer a certificate program in digital humanities. With the addition of new CT faculty, other possible areas include the teaching of writing, or global technical communication. We would also encourage the department to explore options for on-line teaching in the summer sessions: this has been an important recent trend in non-traditional education that has been successful in generating revenue and may help boost enrollment in summer and winter session courses.

## **H. Collaboration**

Right now the most obvious way in which the department collaborates with other units of the University is in the affiliated minors: in particular, the Medieval and Early Modern Studies minor and the Judaic Studies minor, the doctoral program in Language Literacy and Culture, and the undergraduate programs in Gender and Women's Studies, Asian Studies, and the Department of Africana Studies. We are told that the department is also exploring possible collaborations with Global Studies. They fully recognize the value of partnering with the other humanities and humanistic social sciences at UMBC

At the same time, members of the department are wary of pursuing a policy that emphasizes joint hiring as a way of promoting collaboration. They are concerned that too many joint hires would not sufficiently meet the department's core needs in teaching and service (this is a common concern not particular to the UMBC faculty). While an appropriate joint hire might indeed strengthen ties between English and other departments and programs, it should not come at the cost of undercutting the department's own teaching priorities.

The department would also be open to more conversation and collaboration with Media and Communication Studies, and perhaps the Dean's Office could facilitate this. There was some concern expressed that LLC was moving more toward a social science focus which would weaken ties between the literature side of English and that program, while the links with the CT faculty would still be strong. We did not have the opportunity to explore more broadly connections between English and the natural sciences. While the linkages would be less likely for the literature faculty who are more oriented to historical and cultural scholarship, current CT and new faculty who are more oriented to working with digital scholarship might find valuable connection with (for example) psychology, information technology, and engineering.

## **I. Resource Needs**

### **Faculty**

Based on our review, the Department has appropriately identified its areas of greatest need. Notably, the CT program is facing significant challenges in delivering and growing its curriculum with the loss of two faculty, and the replacement hire will undoubtedly help in this regard. Such losses impact the sustainability of the program, and we strongly support the hire of additional faculty in this area. The alignment of Rhetoric and Composition and Digital Humanities not only helps the undergraduate program but the graduate program as well, ensuring that the master's emphasis on text and technology is sustainable. Another emphasis for future CT hires should include some experience with the theories and practice of writing program administration in ways that foster communication and collaboration between CT and the Writing and Rhetoric Division (WARD).

The joint appointment hire between Africana Studies and English represents a clear commitment to support the growth of postcolonial and multiethnic literature in the undergraduate curriculum. However, because of the natural limits on how many courses such an appointment teaches in English, a single joint appointment does not sufficiently address the ongoing needs of the unit. As a result, the need for an additional multiethnic/post-colonial hire, as identified by the unit, remains a significant priority and should be a stand-alone hire in English.

The Department has also expressed interest in developing a co-equal emphasis in Creative Writing, and certainly, the student interest, and faculty teaching expertise warrants further conversation. Because the vast majority of faculty teaching Creative Writing are non-tenure track, it would be imperative that the department develop a plan for a tenure-track hire in this area for ensuring programmatic support and for growing a national reputation to recruit and retain students. Most undergraduate majors in Creative Writing balance poetry and fiction; moreover, the English Department clearly has strengths in creative non-fiction as well, a clear selling point for overall marketability. Perhaps the unit, as it discusses the viability of certificate programs, could add Creative Writing to the list of options.

Based on these differing hiring priorities, the Department should, in consultation with the Dean, re-assess and formalize its multi-year hiring plan where staffing and curriculum development are most needed. Ideally, a hire in Creative Writing, while a significant boost to future recruitment, would be in place prior to the development of any new curricular initiatives in this area. In addition, the department could also explore hires that further create bridges not only between Literature and CT, and CT and WARD, but also between the humanities and STEM, which could include areas such as Literature and Science, Technical Communication, and possibly Writing Across the Curriculum.

### **Graduate Students**

As we note in Section B, the programmatic reputation and growth of the master's program mandates further support of graduate assistantships in English. At many master's programs, students are provided an opportunity to teach first-year writing. This is an invaluable professional development opportunity that will foster future success as both college-level teachers and doctoral program applicants, and thus will be a significant recruitment factor for students not already employed as public school educators.

## **Staff**

Although the APR does not identify staffing needs, our conversation with staff suggests that the two full-time and one-half time employees currently represents an insufficient number for covering the many significant administrative tasks (scheduling, budgeting) and balancing those tasks with the natural interruptions by both faculty and student queries, particularly in a department of 300 majors. As a result of these demands, staff members reported increased stress and concern that they are not able to cross-train in the event of absence. However, because a shared services model will soon be in place, a number of tasks will be centralized and thus alleviate the current workload demands.

## **Questions from the English Department**

### **1) Strengths of Tracks**

The two tracks of the undergraduate major clearly offer important alternatives to undergraduates who would be attracted to the study of English for different reasons, and thus want to pursue different paths, and we support that goal. (We comment elsewhere about the course offerings in the literature track, and how we think those could be broadened to become more diverse.) However, one theme that runs throughout this review is our concern that currently there are not enough tenured and tenured track faculty to offer sufficient support to the CT track, in comparison with the literature track, and thus that track may be getting short shrift. (It was unfortunate that we did not meet with any CT undergraduates, so we could not hear about their experience of the major.)

Throughout our visit, faculty commented on the ongoing question of whether they should abandon the two tracks and instead have a single major with different concentrations, for example, in literature, Creative Writing, and CT. We cannot decide that for the department, but we do think the department needs to seriously discuss whether the current two tracks are sustainable: either sufficient tenure-track faculty need to be hired to sustain the CT track, or the department needs to discuss creating a new model.

### **2) WARD and CT**

There are clearly curricular benefits to aligning WARD and CT, specifically the ability to align knowledge of current writing theory possessed by CT faculty with the ongoing classroom expertise of WARD faculty (particularly their knowledge of student needs). Such alignment would not only benefit the first-year writing program in terms of consistently integrating technology across sections but also benefit CT in that ongoing conversation with and professional development for WARD faculty could allow them to contribute to course offerings in the CT program. Based on our conversations, a lack of communication appears to exist between the two programs, and WARD faculty have expressed concern about their status and sense of voice (avoiding a second-class status model) while CT faculty have expressed concern about opportunities for programmatic leadership and participation in WARD. Moving forward, we would strongly recommend a meeting between the two programs, possibly facilitated by an external mediator, to foster transparency and shared governance moving forward.

### **3) Associate Chair**

Given the administrative duties currently performed by English department faculty, the development of such a position seems less necessary at this time. Typically, Associate Chairs can be responsible for

duties such as scheduling, advising, undergraduate curriculum, and scholarships. While it may be viable given the sense of frustration some faculty with such releases expressed at the limits of a single release to cover the actual administration workload, our conversation with staff suggested that it may in fact create more work for them to have an additional administrative reporting structure. Furthermore, the department might consider revisiting the duties of its various administrators and assess the numbers of course releases currently to ensure workload equity.

#### **4) Mentoring**

The Department and University provide an excellent structure for pre-tenure mentoring toward a successful tenure and promotion process, particularly its external mentoring program about which two pre-tenure faculty were quite enthusiastic. The ability for pre-tenure course releases and a research leave are excellent opportunities for faculty growth as scholars; however, some additional structures would help as well, including the need to reduce the numbers of course preparations and to clarify service expectations. These types of concerns are ones that pre-tenure faculty may not publicly express but should be addressed in both meetings with senior faculty mentors and the department chair.

The department's desire to provide mentoring structures to non-tenure track faculty (NTTF) is highly commendable, and given the longevity of various lecturers and senior lecturers, they themselves should be considered as mentors to newer faculty. In speaking with NTTF, a number of them expressed concern both about the time available for such efforts and about the need for instructor, lecturer, and senior lecturer ranks to be provided with a reward structure for their teaching successes. Thus, the English Department should survey NTTF in more detail about preferred mentoring models and work with the College to advocate for more faculty awards that recognize NTTF teaching and service contributions.

#### **5) Recruitment and Retention**

In our current relentlessly utilitarian world, all departments of English must make the case to prospective students and (increasingly) their parents that there is both practical as well as ethical and intellectual value in the pursuit of the study of literature, writing, and rhetoric. This is particularly true in an era when universities are recruiting more international students, who may be unfamiliar with the discipline. The department should invest in marketing to many different audiences, always being prepared to answer "what do you do with an English major anyway?" We note elsewhere how the current students would like to know more about different pathways toward careers, for all the different sorts of tracks through the major. The department should not only highlight on the website that careers of their graduate but also create more systematic program for career advising and mentoring (with workshops and panels involving recent alums, for example). Providing access to internships is also an important way for students to prepare for the transition from college to job.