

25 May 2024

**TO:** Peggy Re, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs

**FROM:** Kimberly R. Moffitt, Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

**RE:** Academic Program Review, Department of English (ENGL)

I have carefully reviewed the Self-Study for the Academic Program Review of the Department of English (ENGL) and the report of the External Reviewers. The Self-Study highlights the Department's strengths and challenges, and the report of the External Reviewers provides an insightful analysis and offers recommendations for how ENGL might move forward. I will not re-hash the data presented here, but instead begin this report by stating my commitment to the Department and its role as an essential program at a public research university that bolsters a diverse student body. The presence of this disciplinary field and its course offerings are important to the liberal arts experience of a college education, as well as for enhancing our knowledge of the role of literature, writing, and communication to a society. In this period of higher education in which the value of the humanities broadly, and English even more specifically, is challenged I take pride in declaring and reiterating the necessity and the utility of this discipline.

### **External Reviewers' Evaluation**

In their extensive summary the External Reviewers provide historical context of the Department, a description of its engagement with UMBC constituents, and a statement of the documents reviewed for this APR. They also acknowledge important aspects of ENGL's endeavors that are worthy of noting:

- “The department has an extremely **strong faculty** in literature and communication and technology, including assistant professors. They have received a number of competitive fellowships, published books with prestigious presses, and written essays for well-known journals.”
- “A **student-centered focus** is clearly evident among faculty and students... [who] appreciate the small course sizes, the attention from faculty, and the extent to which faculty paid attention to teaching.”
- “**New courses** in both Literature and in Communication and Technology are **innovative and creative**... Activism and service are incorporated into coursework in relevant ways appropriate to the student body.”

All these points are consistent with the importance of ENGL within the College and the University. I am delighted that the External Reviewers were able to ascertain these elements of the Department during their visit on campus.

The External Reviewers also addressed a few areas that pose insight into the Department's future. I note four (4) key areas in which such possibilities can be further considered. Overall, however, I think it important to address the tenor of the report, to which several members of the faculty objected. And while I do agree that some of the perspectives offered here read harsh, and at times, ignored the tremendous efforts of the Department, I also believe there is some merit to what has been shared. In fact, the very nature of an APR is to provide the Department an opportunity to stop, reflect, and assess how to move forward into the future. This report, albeit critical, opens the door for such an important moment for the Department. Oftentimes, an external review is understood as an acknowledgement of the great work of an academic unit; and while that is an aspect of it, it is also a valued reflection point offered by scholars of the field (and selected by the Department) to consider an assessment of its current and potential work going forward. I offer my response with all those considerations in mind.

#### Culture and Climate

The reviewers conveyed, strongly, that many of the challenges existing within the Department, external and internal, resided in concerns with the work environment. Specifically, the reviewers felt that a great deal of attention needed to be placed on the current structure and governance of the Department. These areas ranged from interpersonal relations/interactions amongst faculty colleagues, workload, as well as how various units are organized within the Department. To that end, it was recommended that an external consultant may be able to assist the Department with a climate survey and to offer guidance on how to enhance their collective work together. *As such an opportunity has not been afforded to the Department in recent years, the Dean's Office would be willing to support such an effort, upon a majority vote of the faculty. I do believe this may assist in addressing (mis)communication matters that has impacted the progression of the Department's work together.*

Additionally, it cannot be stated more emphatically that the Department needs to utilize this review to reassess its current structure and governance provisions. As recently as Fall 2023, the Dean's Office expressed similar concerns regarding the specifics of departmental roles and responsibilities, as well as course releases and workload, and asked that this be taken under consideration before our Office signed in agreement with the proposed by-laws. The current chair thought this to be an appropriate undertaking once the new chair was elected for a three-year term (as the current chair's term ends August 22, 2024). *Based on the response of the External Reviewers and the Dean's Office's earlier request, I am stressing the need for the Department to dedicate its next academic year (2024-2025) discussing the current by-laws and addressing specific concerns regarding workload and the structure of its internal units, specifically the WARD program.*

- **Teaching loads and workload** balances remain an ongoing conversation across the University. This was not (and is not) an immediate fix because of our elevation to R1 status. However, faculty colleagues are desirous of the reduced teaching loads, specifically, to support greater research productivity. I support these efforts wholeheartedly and will continue to participate in these discussions with University leadership. I also suspect with the impending arrival of our

permanent Provost that we will be able to advance these conversations further with a protracted timeline. Notwithstanding, the Department should continue to encourage colleagues to seek fellowships and internal funding/ support which will provide opportunities for faculty to reduce their teaching commitment while working on their research. Additionally, considerations should be made to further support early career faculty/assistant professors who may need more time to establish their research agenda toward successful tenure and promotion.

- The Department should ensure that the current structure for workloads is not only based in historical context but aligns with the needs of students and the Department operations of present. The Dean's Office has also raised concern about the number of service tasks that include **course releases** that may not be representative of work/time that accounts for course releases. This matter extends to the distribution of courses among faculty colleagues ranging from our lecturers to full professors. In the spirit of equity, there should be a Department discussion on how best to serve students with a workload distribution that benefits all faculty, without a focus on the precedence set by previous chairs.
- A more challenging area of concern for the External Reviewers is the **WARD program**. An extensive discussion of the by-laws could address several of the points of contention. I do not agree with the stance that a tenured faculty member is necessary to coordinate the program. It is more important that the director of WARD organize a program that remains cutting-edge, innovative, and inclusive of the best practices of a writing program, which in my humble opinion, can be successfully achieved with a non-tenured/non-tenure-track colleague as well. As stated previously, I do see the APR as a reflection point to take account of the way a department might change or revise its current work. Based on the two External Reviewers who have extensive experience in the field of writing/composition, I do think there is an opportunity for the Department to consider a revision of the WARD program, including updating our ENGL 100 course, a major service course to the General Education Program (GEP) at UMBC. While the Department notes repeatedly that it is a UMBC requirement for students to complete this course within their first 30 hours, we often do not meet this directive because of the limited number of sections of the course or the lack of faculty available to teach. I would like to support the Department in (re)thinking how this issue can be addressed without simply hiring additional faculty who will only have a limited number of sections of the course to teach. (I note that such an effort was made by the Dean's Office Spring 2024 to hire four (4) additional visiting lecturers at the request of the Department, and yet only two (2) of those positions were filled).

### Advising

The External Reviewers noted a pressing and consistent message seen in several recent CAHSS APR reports regarding the role of faculty in advising. While the commitment of the faculty to develop interpersonal connections with our students has been deemed quite valuable, the use of the time to advise on course planning has not. Those important interactions between faculty and student have been most beneficial when the time is used to mentor and discuss opportunities that serve the student well.

The College continues to enhance its college-wide advising offerings to specifically strengthen our students' time-to-degree and mentoring relationships. We have made several steps recently to assure faculty that mentoring, not advising should be their primary focus with their student interactions. To that end, we have elevated the Coordinator of Advising to the level of Director and subsumed several

departmental advising tasks under this unit. This work began with our larger departments (e.g., Psychology and Economics); yet the growth of this unit has continued as a means of supporting several more departments. We have recently hired one of two professional advisors to offer their support and guidance to students during their first two years of college with the hope of departments assuming the mentoring role after that point. As this has become a primary task for the Dean's Office, we only ask the Department to support us in the ongoing transition. While many faculty recognize the value of this shift, there are also several colleagues who are most familiar with the previous mode of advising and have hesitated to relinquish advising to the College fully. To that end, the Department should engage discussions with the Director of Advising to ascertain the options available to further support the Department with its advising needs.

### Curriculum Revisions

The External Reviewers were optimistic about the direction of the Department regarding Creative Writing and even a Professional Writing minor, which could potentially increase participation of STEM students. The Department is scheduled to search for an assistant professor of Creative Writing in AY2024-2025, which will serve as a good opportunity to further explore the possibility of a track in Creative Writing. I would encourage the Department to await the arrival of that new colleague before revising this aspect of the curriculum. I raise this concern, as also noted by the External Reviewers, that there are several small sections of courses currently being taught across the Department and we want to be strategic in developing new areas of study, especially as we seek to attract more majors.

### Graduate Program

The Department currently has a small Master of Arts program, in which students speak favorably. However, the stagnation of the program raises concerns for the faculty to consider. With limited resources to contribute to a master's program (e.g., graduate assistantships, etc.), it does complicate the opportunity for growth. I would still like the Department to work with the Dean's Office to explore ways we can sustain the program to highlight our continued commitment to the humanities.

### **Conclusion**

The Department of English is an important academic program with tremendous potential. This APR has provided us with opportunities to strategically create a program full of innovation that will address the needs of our students. I am certain with the efforts to address the by-laws and the curriculum revisions for WARD and Creative Writing that English can be a model unit on our campus. The Dean's Office stands with the Department to accomplish these goals.