

Review Report

Department of English

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

North Carolina State University

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Review Team

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The review team would like to express its gratitude to the Department of English for its warm hospitality and in particular to Tony Harrison, head of the department. This report is based on meetings with deans of the college and the Graduate School, departmental administrators, staff, students, and faculty. We were asked to focus on the undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Because the First-Year Writing Program is very large and aimed at students throughout the university, we recommend that it be reviewed separately in the future by appropriately trained reviewers. The Conference on College Composition and Communication provides such reviewers. Our report consists of two sections, the strengths of the department and opportunities for improvement and recommendations.

Strengths

- Faculty members in all programs have significant accomplishments in research, teaching, and service. Students report that professors are knowledgeable, accessible, responsive to their needs, and often inspiring.
- Creative writing has been a fast-rising and successful program in faculty and student recruitment, course enrollment, curriculum (despite some conflicts over the literature requirement), and publication among both faculty and students. The program leaders have a clear and reasonable sense of both program capacity and their mission as it relates to peer institutions.
- The MSTC is a historical departmental strength with a good match for the historical mission of the land-grant college. There is a strong connection with local industry and the Research Triangle. Enrollment and placement are excellent. And the faculty is internationally recognized both for program development and research, though approaching a transitional period with multiple retirements on the near horizon.
- The linguistics program has an equally strong faculty profile and makes a considerable contribution to graduate education at the MA and PhD level, providing an outstanding example at the doctoral level of interdepartmental cooperation with sociology. It compares very favorably to other programs across the country. In addition to standard academic publication and an excellent external funding record, the linguistics program does fine work in outreach and public education on language variation and diversity.
- The Digital Humanities initiative in English offers an innovative approach to literary and cultural study. In addition to bringing distinction upon the department and its individual practitioners, it's likely to remain a good source of inspiration and financial support for graduate students and could make an as-yet unrealized contribution to undergraduate education. It presents an outstanding model for interdisciplinary and interdepartmental research.
- The English department plays an extensive role in writing instruction across departments and disciplines, including the Campus Writing and Speaking Program. The work is directed and carried out by a nationally prominent faculty with a good research agenda.
- Small class size allows for writing-intensive and other high-impact pedagogical practices in the English curriculum.
- The undergraduate internship program provides a valuable connection with the community and good opportunities for co-curricular learning.

- Mentoring and general support of junior faculty are commendable and consistent.
- The English department head (who gets high marks from his colleagues in general) and CHASS are routinely credited with supplying financial support for research in a number of different areas (through seed money and internal grants) as well as providing help via the college's grant office.
- Faculty and students in the department are supported by a dedicated, personable, competent, and well-informed staff.
- Space and facilities range from adequate to excellent.

Opportunities for Improvement and Recommendations

1. Graduate Programs

- a. Financial support for graduate students in all areas (creative writing, linguistics, rhetoric/composition, literature, technical communication, film) is comparatively weak, ranging from \$12,000 (plus tuition) for students in creative writing to \$11,000 for those in linguistics to \$9000 for the remaining MA students. In addition, only a fraction of the MA students in literature and rhetoric/composition receive support of any kind. As a result, recruitment suffers demonstrably. Two ways to address this problem would be to offer more TA appointments and a better support package to qualified applicants. Any doubt about the need for these reforms might be dispelled by a comparison of the level of support in this department with English graduate programs in peer institutions. The current level is simply not competitive.
- b. The MA in English needs a curricular evaluation and overhaul. While the MFA and MSTC have a clear mission and sense of capacity, with steady enrollments, the MA seems in flux, with declining enrollment and applications in literature (as in the undergraduate program) while linguistics and rhetoric/comp remain steadier. The department needs to reconsider the place of literature in the overall program and also undertake an evaluation and reformulation of the curriculum (again following the recommendations on the undergraduate program). Some comparison to practices in peer institutions could be helpful.

2. Undergraduate Programs

- a. Many faculty in literature, the largest constituent in the department, are attempting to transform both course offerings and the overall shape of literary study in the face of a general decline in undergraduate enrollments and a specific decline in the literature concentration. Their efforts, however, have been largely unsuccessful. A fundamental curricular revision (more than changing course titles) seems necessary at this point, with offerings tied to the specific interests and research projects of individual faculty, many of these interdisciplinary, rather than to the usual divisions of knowledge in literary studies: for example, period configurations or certain author clusters. Currently offered special topics courses, reported as popular among students and faculty, could provide a guide to this kind of programmatic curricular reform.
- b. The department has developed a number of co-curricular opportunities for majors, including Undergraduate Research (UR) experiences and internships; students spoke

very positively about these course complements and asked for more of them and more information about them. Also, the Vice Chancellor and Dean for Academic and Student Affairs indicated an interest in working with faculty in English to develop a range of UR models (which can be found in the Kinkead Grobman *Undergraduate Research in English Studies* anthology). We recommend that a full catalogue of these co-curricular opportunities be developed, that they be shared with advisors, and that advisors develop a consistent means of sharing them with students with suggestions for the appropriate timing for students to engage in such activities. Likewise, students might be encouraged, and instructed, in developing electronic portfolios showcasing their development and accomplishments.

- c. The film programs at the undergraduate and graduate level in English have a self-admitted identity problem. We recommend that, unless the film faculty can find effective ways of integrating with other concentrations (such as literature), their small number of majors might be better served in an interdisciplinary program while the faculty continue to teach their well-enrolled general education classes in English.

3. Assessment

- a. The department should track progress of graduates from the different programs more carefully and tie curricular reform to solid data about placement and other outcomes, especially as concerns the graduate program. Complete information on placement in and completion of PhD programs by MA graduates, for example, would be helpful.
- b. Over the last decade, the major in English has declined by over 20%, and the proportions across the various concentrations have shifted, with LWR now accounting for over 1/3 of the students in the major and literature accounting for only 61 majors. The assessment data shared in the self study suggest that students give their courses and the faculty high marks as they graduate, a review shared by the undergraduate students we met; in fact, the evaluations are the highest in CHASS. Alumni, however, rank the department the lowest of the college regarding their general education and preparation relative to graduates from other institutions. Without disaggregating the data, it's difficult to know what the data mean, but examining and analyzing the data in various terms—concentration, graduation year, gender, ethnicity, additional education, employment status, and so forth—can help the department begin to understand the issues raised in the survey. Given this context, we recommend that a thorough analysis of the alumni survey results be conducted, that ongoing alumni surveys be conducted, and that the results be shared with the department so as to decide how to act on them.
- c. Likewise, the department has designed an assessment plan keyed to a rotating list of undergraduate major outcomes and has begun implementation of the plan. Initial results suggest that a third of the students submitted writing samples assessed at the “‘good’ to ‘exemplary’ range,” that no single area of weakness could be identified, and that samples categorized as creative writing presented special challenges. Again, however, no action based on these results was identified. We recommend that the assessment results be subjected to additional analysis and that action based on those

results be identified, implemented, and monitored with the intent of raising the score when this outcome is assessed again. In addition this model for curricular enhancement based on a feedback loop should inform the assessment activity keyed to the other outcomes.

4. Hiring

- a. To maintain its current level of success and prestige, the MSTC needs a senior rhetorician in a field like rhetoric of science to replace its founder. The program should also seek a replacement for each of its impending retirements, especially because the MSTC faculty also contribute to the CRDM and the undergraduate concentration in LWR.
- b. The LWR has recently experienced an increase in undergraduate majors. The program, according to conversations with faculty, currently lacks leadership. We recommend that a priority in hiring should be a position in rhetoric and composition to address both the increase in undergraduate majors in LWR and the issues involving leadership.
- c. The Creative Writing program should consider expanding its offerings in creative nonfiction and consider other ways of folding journalism into its mission. A junior hire in creative nonfiction may make sense in the near future.