

Linguistics

A department in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts offering the B.A. in Linguistics and interdisciplinary B.A. degrees in Linguistics and Anthropology, Linguistics and Chinese, Linguistics and German, Linguistics and Japanese, Linguistics and Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology, and Linguistics and Russian; the M.A.; and the Ph.D.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

William A. Ladusaw, chair (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Daniel Dinnsen (Indiana University)

Janet Dean Fodor (Graduate Center of the City University of New York)

Jane Grimshaw (Rutgers, the State University)

■ Main Issues

The visiting team commended the departments on its outstanding accomplishments, “which are well-known within the field of Linguistics but deserve explicit acknowledgement for the broader institutional audience.” Of special note were the department’s “national and international reputation for linguistics research of the highest quality,” as well as the department’s “outstanding track record in graduate education,” a program that is “unquestionably one of the very best in the world.”

- Research productivity was found to be excellent even when compared with the “ambitious” list of peer institutions chosen for benchmarking. The team found that “the amount and diversity of external support ... is unusually high for a linguistics department,” and that “the breadth of research ... and engagement in collaborative research and in projects with practical applications has allowed them to draw on several sources of funding.” The team also noted that research productivity in terms of both publications and research grants is “broadly spread across the faculty, indicating a faculty with strength in all areas.”
- The strength of the graduate program was “reflected in the department’s #1 National Research Council ranking in graduate education in 1995,” and remains very high. The team observed that “many UMass graduates hold influential positions within the field,” and that current students are “right to be confident and enthusiastic.” The two noteworthy special characteristics of the graduate program were found to be the strength of graduate study in semantics and the strong focus in experimental linguistics. The team was concerned, however, that the “current Linguistics stipend level [for graduate assistants] does not fare well in comparison with other leading Linguistics departments.”
- The team found that the undergraduate program in the department “has a shorter history but also seems to have achieved a high level of quality and engagement with undergraduates befitting the graduate program.” The undergraduate program was found to be well designed and imaginative, and faculty have “insured that the undergraduates can engage with the research mission of the department and take advantage of the high quality” of the graduate program. The team’s only concern with respect to the undergraduate program was its ultimate size. The team noted that the undergraduate program has grown quickly to a “very healthy

size” for an institution of this size, and cautioned that “there is reason to proceed thoughtfully in the effort to further increase course enrollments or numbers of majors — and in particular the number of courses devoted solely to the undergraduate program.” By spreading themselves too thin “it would be far too easy for the faculty to overextend themselves and put either the quality of the Ph.D. program at risk or set themselves up for burnout.”

With these findings in mind the team reviewed and endorsed the main elements of the department’s strategic plan: 1) improved research infrastructure, including improved facilities and research staff support; 2) addition of a junior-level faculty position in semantics, to build on historic strength and attract outstanding graduate students; and 3) addition of a faculty position in experimental linguistics to capitalize on the “fruitfulness of the blend of theory and experimental methodologies,” an emerging trend of which UMass is “at the forefront.” The team also expressed the view that the additional faculty positions should be used to “rebalance” faculty workload rather than support increased enrollment.

■ Results of the Review

The department reported being “pleased” with the team’s “enthusiastic and thoroughgoing support,” and for its “very explicit support for what the department perceives as crucial needs.” The Dean also acknowledged the team’s “gratifying assessment,” and gave general endorsement to the department’s three strategic goals.

The Dean also reported specific progress under way to achieve those goals. Plans are well advanced to provide improved research space to the department. With respect to allocations for additional faculty, the Dean observed that the department is well positioned to compete for funding in the Amherst 250 process. Given that the College was undergoing a transition in leadership at the time the review was completed, the Dean noted that the questions of graduate stipends and lab staffing would have to await conversations with the new Dean.