

English

A department in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts offering the B.A., M.A., M.F.A. and Ph.D.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Cheryl Wall, chair (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey)

Patrick Brantlinger (Indiana University)

Gail Hawisher (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

■ Main Issues

Overall, the review team found the department to be “highly regarded by its students, university administrators, and professional peers.” It was held to be in the top third of English departments at Research I universities, with particular strengths in Renaissance Studies and in Writing.

The team also observed, however, that the department is “at a crossroads” following years of faculty departures and growing enrollments. The “combination of increasing enrollments and inadequate staffing weakens the quality of instruction” at the undergraduate level, and has already placed the graduate program “in crisis” because so much faculty effort is consumed meeting undergraduate demand. Particularly at risk, in the team’s view, is the involvement of tenure system faculty in the undergraduate program: “Unlike too many of its peer institutions, the English department has refused to cede a substantial share of its responsibility for undergraduate instruction to adjuncts.” Complicating the situation is the department’s strong emphasis on writing, which, while a recognized strength, involves numerous small courses and substantial faculty effort. The team noted that faculty losses have been most serious in the areas supporting writing, with only two tenure system faculty lines remaining (before current round hires).

In the team’s view, the faculty in its current state is too small to maintain this emphasis on writing and on the involvement of faculty in undergraduate education. The team’s central recommendation was therefore to grow the size of the department’s faculty from 35 to 50 over a period of years. This would permit a reduction in faculty workload (from 3-2 to what the team described as a more typical 2-2 load), and allow the department to meet undergraduate demand without undercutting scholarly productivity.

While the team members were impressed with the department’s scholarly and research achievements, they stated that it “depends on a level of sacrifice that is untenable over the long term” because of the high teaching obligations. The need to resolve the conflict between teaching demands and scholarship was described as “urgent.”

The team’s specific observations and recommendations reflected these overall themes. The undergraduate program was seen as highly effective with strong student support. Increasing class sizes was the most often cited complaint on the part of students. Some students also expressed a desire for more writing courses, and the team noted that, given the department’s emphasis on writing, it would make sense to introduce an undergraduate track in writing.

The graduate program was found to be operating with “remarkable effectiveness” given faculty losses. Losses have, however, affected coverage to the point that “all areas of literary study except perhaps 19th and 20th Century American Literature are understaffed.” The team also found a number of “disincentives” to faculty research in addition to high teaching loads, ranging from lack of research and travel money to inadequate technical support.

The team had high praise for the department’s efforts to plan a recovery strategy and focus on areas of interdisciplinary strength in which future hiring should be concentrated. The team endorsed the department’s identification of four strengths on which to build: American Literary and Interdisciplinary Studies; British Empire and Postcolonial Studies; Writing; and Early Modern Studies.

In light of these findings the team made six specific recommendations:

- Adopt a multi-year hiring plan to reach a total of 50 faculty (vs. the 45 proposed in the departmental self-study).
- Focus on the four identified areas of strength, and revise graduate course offerings in light of these new directions.
- Secure additional support for faculty research, including travel funds.
- Reduce the teaching load as soon as possible.
- Expand development efforts along the lines of the pilot Juniper Summer Writing Institute already launched.
- Make senior faculty hires at every opportunity, in recognition of the recent and impending loss of so many senior faculty in the department.

■ Results of the Review

The department concurred with all of the team’s findings and recommendations, and made a specific request for sufficient central funding to permit two faculty hires a year beyond what would be possible from reinvestment of future retirement savings. Teaching loads would be reduced if sufficient new faculty are hired, and the five new faculty already in the pipeline will have 2-2 loads for their first year. The department will use its gift fund to make small amounts of professional travel money available to new faculty, and will continue to explore new development opportunities. The department reported that it has already begun revising the graduate curriculum to reflect identified areas of strength, and will continue to do so. In addition, the department will seek to create an undergraduate writing track utilizing existing courses.

The dean also endorsed the teams major recommendations, and agreed that rebuilding the faculty to 50 should be “the first order of business.” The dean agreed to reinvest faculty retirement savings, but also stated that pursuing the full faculty hiring plan will “require an investment of central funds.” If state funds are not available for faculty, research support, fellowships, equipment, and other needs, the dean urged stronger development efforts to provide necessary funding.