

English

A department in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts offering the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English, and the M.F.A. (Creative Writing).

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Robert N. Watson (University of California, Los Angeles)
Cynthia L. Selfe (The Ohio State University)
Barbara Harlow (University of Texas, Austin)

■ Main Issues

The Visiting Team described the Department of English as a community of vibrant scholars, with a faculty that excels in both teaching and scholarship, and undergraduate and graduate student populations that “appear loyal and intellectually engaged.” The reviewers found that both students and faculty showed great commitment and enthusiasm for the undergraduate program. They also praised the curriculum reform process for the undergraduate program, as consonant with departmental strengths, reflective of trends in teaching literature that has historically been excluded from the canon, and promoting interdisciplinary perspectives. The reviewers highlighted numerous strengths of the graduate program, including positive relations between students and faculty and overall camaraderie. The Writing Program was noted to stand out for its “systematic and carefully considered” training and support of TOs. The M.F.A. program was highlighted as “a jewel in the crown of the UMass system,” with its record of distinction built by both faculty and student creative work.

Some of these positive assessments were coupled with expressions of concern and recommendations for improvement, especially related to strains produced by the “stubborn numerical limits” of less than ideal material resources.

The reviewers highlighted the following challenges:

- A shortage of courses at the undergraduate level for students to advance through the curriculum in a timely way, resulting in “persistent difficulties” for students and a frequent need to complete the degree using the “upside-down path.” The shortage was particularly noted for rhetoric and composition, with the department only able to offer one faculty-taught undergraduate course per year in this area.
- Limited staffing devoted to undergraduate advising needs, coupled with a diminished number of faculty members, which has led to “altogether insufficient” advising for the ~800 majors, in obtaining guidance on coursework as well as on career development.
- At the graduate program level, inadequate fellowship money to remain competitive against comparable programs at the national level, resulting in current students often having to “teach throughout their graduate careers” or even take on employment irrelevant to their career goals.
- Added burdens on energy and scheduling resulting from the Writing Program teaching load increase from two to three courses.

- Gaps in communication, leading to misunderstandings on the part of graduate students about such things as opportunities in coursework and teaching.
- A need to integrate digital scholarly environments and scholarly tools into the graduate experience, to help position students well within the job market and foster contributions to related specialized scholarly work.

With these issues in mind, the team made several recommendations:

- With respect to resources, the team identified as the top priority hiring additional faculty balancing coverage of traditional areas of literary study with those reflecting “intersecting areas of intellectual commitment.” The team also called for increased staffing for advising, preferably through appointing a Chief Undergraduate Advisor on a full-time basis.
- At the undergraduate level, the team recommended implementing the plan for an English departmental honors option.
- For the graduate program, the team urged an increase in graduate student financial support (increasing the number of competitive fellowships, establishing new Research Assistant positions, and increasing graduate student stipends to keep pace with nationally competitive levels). The team also urged exploration of a Ph.D. program to build on the department’s strength in Creative Writing. In terms of general support for graduate students, the team recommended improving communication regarding policies, opportunities, and obligations and exploration of the potential to integrate digital scholarly environments and tools into graduate training.
- Technology improvements were recommended in terms of both technology support staff and acquisition of specialized software.
- The team encouraged the College to continue seed funding for projects to build on interdisciplinary and other initiatives (the Center for Digital Humanities, the Interdisciplinary Seminar in the Humanities and Arts (ISHA), and the Renaissance Center. The department was also urged to improve departmental fundraising through alumni and a “friends” group.

■ Results of the Review

In responding to the comments and recommendations of the Visiting Team, the Chair of the Department of English, while agreeing that the need for an increase in faculty lines is “a pressing need,” also acknowledged that a dramatic change could not occur immediately in the larger context of similar needs across campus. The Chair identified two hiring priorities, which were in turn endorsed by the reviewers, and would explicitly not be full-time tenure track positions: 1) a rotating visiting position in the MFA program, and 2) the conversion of the half-time Chief Undergraduate Advisor position to a full-time position. He also noted that the departmental Honors program was already under development.

The Chair stated that he plans to establish two entering fellowships for the Ph.D. program, and will increase stipends for fellows if funding should become available. The dissertation workshop is also being reestablished, and the relevant faculty committees are endeavoring to make improvements in graduate TA training. The Chair also agreed with the Visiting Team on its recommendations regarding technological improvements, and was able to commit to a system for the purchase of software as well as a continuing budget for it, though costs to hire a full-time staff member for technological support would be “prohibitive.” Other departmental actions in the past year that are consonant with the reviewers’ recommendations include steps to improve fundraising, improvement of departmental communication processes, and plans to revise the undergraduate major to provide better access to courses.

The Dean concurred with Visiting Team's positive comments on the Department of English. She stated she would continue to advocate for centrally funded faculty positions, while encouraging the department to seek partnerships such as those supported by the RFPs. Noting the reviewers' support for the Center for the Digital Humanities, the Dean added that outside funding was indeed being sought to support the Center and its projects, through a number of different faculty proposals. Concluding that "we are in a time of funding transition," the Dean reported that the department was slated to receive incentive funds, and she called on them to combine relying on their own resources for smaller initiatives so that the College could effectively respond to the major needs.

■ Outcomes Assessment

The Department of English has an established set of student learning objectives for the undergraduate major. The department employs various indirect methods of assessment, including the use of senior survey data, faculty surveys, and structured communications between instructors of ENG 200 and 300, to ascertain student achievement of these learning outcomes as a measure of departmental success. At last report to OAPA, a department-wide meeting was held in Spring 2009 to evaluate the stated goals and objectives and consider results of a faculty survey on student skills. The goals of the evaluation process were to address weaknesses, build on strengths, and consider ways to make the major more cohesive.