

OUTSIDE EVALUATION—April 17, 2006
English Department, University of Florida

OVERVIEW

The evaluation took place from Monday morning, April 3, through early Wednesday afternoon, April 5, 2006. The four evaluators were provided with the departmental self-study, faculty vitas and salaries, and department web site access beforehand. As appropriate, they emailed the Head for additional information before arriving.

The evaluators agree that the University of Florida has an exceptionally strong English department overall. Its faculty teaches innovative courses, publishes extensively, and generally works well together. Despite being notably underpaid and working with distinctly limited resources for the state's flagship research university, the faculty are generally happy. They are happy for the very best of reasons--because the department offers them a rewarding intellectual atmosphere that compensates for things that would greatly distress faculty elsewhere: extreme salary compression and marginal research support. The open curriculum accounts for a significant amount of faculty job satisfaction. Florida faculty teach the courses they most want to teach. Teaching and research thus coalesce and together make for a coherent, mutually reinforcing professional life.

We believe the department has been well led by its present head. He has overseen high quality hiring, has worked hard to repair salary disparities, has assembled a fine administrative team, and has made major strides in supporting research for untenured faculty. We take particular and enthusiastic note of the multi-year support packages for new faculty and of the guarantee of a research semester free of teaching for untenured faculty. At the same time, ten years is about as long as any administrator can hope to last in a job, so new leadership will give the department the opportunity to experiment with different decision making practices. Some committees, including those supervising course offerings, could take a more active role. Communication between administrators and faculty and students could be improved. Web-based guides to procedures should be expanded and continually updated.

We do also believe the department could do a better job of communicating the strengths of its unstructured curriculum and innovative courses--both to the rest of the university and to the profession at large. To this end we suggest the department collaborate on writing an effective mission statement and creating a completely overhauled website geared toward the world, rather than toward colleagues already informed about how the curriculum works.

General Recommendations:

1. The administration should consider using one entry-level salary in August 2006 to eliminate the worst elements of salary compression. For example: it is inappropriate for active associate professors to be paid less than assistant professors, inappropriate for new assistant professors to be paid more than faculty hired earlier at the same rank. We endorse the department's practice of paying market rate for new hires. That practice has enabled the department to compete for top new PhDs. But the college should take responsibility for helping the department to fix the resulting inequities promptly.

2. High priority should be assigned to filling needed faculty appointments in earlier periods and in rhetoric and composition. Both PhD and MFA students pointed out that the fields of Renaissance, 18th Century poetry, and Romantic poetry were underrepresented in recent course offerings at the graduate level. The decision to abandon medieval studies reflects inadequate funding and could be reversed with proper support.

3. A few faculty who are no longer as professionally active-- along with one or two who are perhaps unhappy either with the very open curriculum that has made Florida a success, or with the theoretical direction of the discipline over the last thirty years--are scheduled for retirement in the next two years. Their salaries should stay with the department so that the department can renew itself with new appointments as needed.

4. If UF's English department is to either maintain or improve its quality and national reputation, it will need to make several mid-level appointments in the near term. Raising the department's national ranking is a more difficult task, given that high visibility senior appointments are usually necessary for that purpose. A position like the Milbauer chair could certainly attract a major scholar, but senior searches without substantial research support are less likely to win candidates who would impact the department's ranking. A senior appointment in rhetoric and composition to direct the writing program, however, is an immediate priority. Given that several senior retirements are contractually guaranteed, we would recommend that a range of searches--including several for advanced assistant or associate professors--commence in fall 2006 and fall 2007.

5. The open curriculum should receive more coordinated oversight, so that courses that both undergraduate and graduate students need are offered as appropriate and that faculty do not, in effect, virtually duplicate one another's courses in subsequent semesters.

6. The department and the administration should work together to increase faculty research support--for conference travel, research travel, and to fund research assistants. A modest investment here would increase faculty visibility. Several senior graduate students might be hired to be assigned to faculty research on a rotating basis.

7. Current faculty FTE should be increased by five to seven to bring the faculty to a number at all proportionate to the size of their undergraduate major and the number of current graduate students. Comparison with peer programs of comparable size would justify a still larger increase in the number of faculty, so it should be clear we regard our recommendation as the minimum necessary to offer the courses needed to run the program.

8. The MA/PhD program needs another secretary, while the MFA program needs an office manager. Staff in the English department are overburdened, and graduate students find it hard to get the direction they need to resolve bureaucratic problems. We find the number of support staff surprisingly low for a program the size of those at UF.

9. Finally, we should make it clear that a substantially redesigned and much more elaborate web site should include individual faculty pages with several sample poems, stories, essays, or book chapters for each faculty member. A short one page biography for each faculty member might also help,

allowing ongoing interests and activities to be identified. A full or partial list of publications would also help. The current web site is inadequate. We understand a colleague generously donated time to set it up, but the kind of site we envision would require paid help to get everything online. A web site is today both a major recruitment mechanism and perhaps the primary way of representing the department to the world. A fully developed site should be up and running by fall 2006. We recommend you look at sample web sites from around the country, including the one at the University of Illinois, though Florida will need more complete detail about rules and procedures.

A. GRADUATE PROGRAM:

The evaluation team interviewed some fifty graduate students in both large and small groups over a period of several hours. This is a significant sample of currently enrolled students and gives us a sound basis for the recommendations we wish to make. Though graduate students have some valid complaints, they are consistently happy with the quality and intellectual rigor of the courses they take. They are equally excited about teaching opportunities at the University of Florida. English department graduate students are consistently impressive--articulate, thoughtful, dedicated. Their main difficulty is with compensation. Master's students teach a 2/1 load, while PhD students teach 1/1. The Modern Language Association recommends a maximum 1/1 teaching load for all graduate students, but we find Florida's modest adjustment acceptable. Unfortunately, annual compensation at Florida is at minimum several thousands of dollars less than at comparable institutions. The lack of satisfactory health care for these young teachers is equally serious and makes the gap with comparable institutions still wider. In addition, though we find the academic program works well, there are some adjustments we would recommend be given consideration.

Recommendations:

1. Increase annual graduate stipends by at least \$ 3,000- \$ 4,000.
2. Provide fully funded health care for all students teaching at least a 1/1 load.
3. Establish a minimum enrollment of 4 for any graduate seminar to count as part of a faculty member's teaching load. This would provide modest inducement for faculty to better match their offerings with graduate student needs.
4. Encourage faculty to submit two proposed seminars each year, ranked in order of preference, so that the department's scheduling committee can select an alternative topic if necessary to assure a sufficient range of seminars.
5. Institute a more effective advising system for incoming students.
6. Require graduate students proposing special topic composition courses or upper division literature courses to submit two proposed topics so the department is better able to mount a diverse course schedule.

7. Reliance on graduate students to teach upper division courses has, we believe, reached a maximum advisable level. If more upper division courses are needed, more faculty should be hired.

8. Make teaching assignments to graduate employees in a more timely fashion. This will require increased cooperation and efficiency from other units, including the University Writing Program.

9. The department's graduate committee should include graduate students from each class, so there is a forum where graduate student representatives can inform the department administration about course needs and scheduling problems and ask questions that arise among their constituency.

II. THE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

The University of Florida's MFA program in Creative Writing has long been regarded as one of the strongest programs of its kind in the country, with a distinguished faculty of novelists and poets who remain dedicated teachers even as they are actively publishing. With very few exceptions, the graduate students currently in the MFA program spoke with gratitude and admiration for the writing faculty. They reported receiving thorough, supportive comments on their work from their professors. The rotation of workshops gives students a chance to study with most of the CRW faculty and learn about different methods and styles. The tutorials provide a vital opportunity for independent study and complement the workshops with diverse reading material. And the seminars, particularly the classes focusing on specific literary forms, help to broaden students' understanding of literary precedents.

While the MFA program ranks high by reputation, it is lower in national rankings than it should be. With the recent expansions and initiatives in the CWP (including more workshops for fiction and poetry, a translation workshop, and the addition of a prestigious new journal, *Subtropics*), the program is in a perfect position to make itself more visible and competitive nationally. The main pieces are in place to turn the MFA program into one of the top-rated programs in the country. This would be a significant asset not just to the rest of the graduate program in English but to the whole UF community.

Recommendations:

1. Despite the increased hours required for the MFA degree, we believe any graduate student teaching at least a 1/1 load should receive a full tuition waiver. Failure to provide that level of support negatively impacts both admissions and morale.

2. As with the MA and PhD programs, low stipends and the absence of health insurance means Florida unnecessarily loses applicants to other institutions.

3. Reinstall the annual appeal for alumni fundraising. The MFA program used to raise up to \$ 6,000 a year from alumni. In recent years, they haven't been allowed to raise money separately from the department. But as in other MFA programs around the country, there's potential to create endowments, with support from MFA alumni, for otherwise under funded fellowships and reading series.

III. RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION:

In 2003 the UF Provost made the decision to remove the university's introductory composition program from English department control and relocate it to his office. No explicit reasons for this decision were given then or since. The English department was given no opportunity to respond to this decision in advance. The faculty senate was not consulted. That year an inept televised lecture format was adopted for the course. By all accounts it failed, and the writing program was moved to LAS the following year.

The only substantive complaint we heard about the program prior to 2003 was that English 1102, a special topics research paper course, often had topics that students or their parents found offensive. We judge the problem to have been the failure to announce topics clearly in advance and to give students an opportunity to enroll in a topic of their choice. While it is not the business of American higher education to protect undergraduates from being intellectually and culturally challenged, truth in advertising and reasonable freedom of choice are fair and appropriate components of a degree program. A research paper based on collective, focused reading and discussion is a sound idea. All the course needed was a variety of clearly specified topics in each time period, with mechanisms for students to enroll in a topic of choice.

In any case UF should not expect its basic composition courses on their own to solve the problem of student writing. At the very least, a properly funded Writing Center--allowing multiple visits per semester--needs to be put in place, along with a writing across the curriculum program that gives undergraduates continued practice and additional training in writing.

We strongly endorse the proposal to arrange for a full independent review of the writing program, which should be completed no later than early this fall. We also believe it necessary to begin considering the more plausible options now.

Recommendations:

1. Either return the three writing courses to the English department or build more English department responsibility into the structure of the program. The writing program directly affects the intellectual development of graduate students in English and must be integrated into their academic life.
2. If UWP is to continue being located outside the department, its director should be an English department faculty member in the field of rhetoric and composition, hired with tenure to ensure the Director's intellectual independence. The search committee for that position should have majority English department membership.
3. The curriculum of the UWP should be revised better to reflect the research and best practices known in the field of rhetoric and composition. Graduate students in English must have experience with a current writing program in order to market that experience effectively in their job searches.
4. Supervision of the mentoring and teacher training part of the UWP should be done by English department faculty in the field of rhetoric and composition in order to integrate all aspects of the graduate students' professional development.

5. Department involvement in the program would be enhanced by rotating this responsibility and that of the writing program director among several qualified faculty. No writing program administrator should be put in place without a specified term.

6. The first-year orientation and first-year mentoring program needs to be redesigned for both MA and MFA candidates. Currently, new teachers spend an entire semester "shadowing" a PhD student, sitting in on a writing class two or three times a week, and they attend a practicum several times each semester. The semester-long shadowing exercise tries all participants' patience and appears to continue past any hope of yielding useful results. The second semester they team-teach a writing class. Numerous anecdotal reports suggest the undergrads do not like the team-taught course; their responses should be studied. A more efficient and satisfying program might focus instead on a semester-long pedagogy seminar, with only a limited shadowing component.

IV. UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM:

The undergraduate program appears on the whole to be popular and effective, though no enforcement program exists to assure that students meet the expectations of the department's official models. As with the graduate program, scheduling of courses in earlier periods appears to be less reliable. Finally, the members of the evaluation team share a preference for students to be required to take two courses in periods before 1900. Contemporary diversity provides welcome introduction to cultural difference but cannot on its own give an understanding of historical development.

Recommendations:

1. Hire at least one more staff advisor to ensure that all undergraduate students follow specified models and develop a coherent body of coursework. Include a graduation check.
2. Ensure that all models include a range of types of courses, including earlier as well as later literature and theoretical as well as textual studies.
3. Have faculty submit multiple options for undergraduate courses so that the department's scheduling committee can balance needs for earlier and later literature along with other types of diversity.

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