

## **Review Team Members**

William Handley, Associate Professor of English, University of Southern California

Elaine Lewinnek, Professor of American Studies, CSU Fullerton

Kathryn Rummell, Professor and Chair of English, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo

## **The Review Process**

The review team studied the Program Performance Review Self-Study for English and Comparative Literature before visiting the department on February 28, 2020. During that visit, we talked to over two dozen full-time and part-time faculty; the department's three staff members; eight students, including three graduate students; and met twice with the Chair, Stephen Mexal, and with Dean Sheryl Fontaine and Associate Dean Jessica Stern.

We would like to thank the CSUF English and Comparative Literature Department for an extremely enjoyable site visit. Department Chair Stephen Mexal offered valuable insight into the programs, and expressed a keen desire for ideas and suggestions as part of the review process. Associate Dean Jessica Stern and Dean Sheryl Fontaine were thoughtful and helpful in their questions and seem genuinely committed to helping departments improve. And finally, we want to thank all of the faculty and students who took time away from their busy schedules to share their ideas about program improvement with us.

What follows are our impressions of the English Department's strengths and challenges, along with some recommendations for change. Such recommendations are always a tricky business; an outsider's eye is helpful because of its relative objectivity, but also problematic because subjectivity does, of course, matter. Each campus is unique and has challenges and opportunities that are local and contextual; reading a self-study and engaging in a one-day site visit cannot substitute for the on-the-ground experience of the faculty. We offer our suggestions, then, with the utmost respect for the outstanding and dedicated faculty in the program and with the hope that they help strengthen an already-strong department.

## **Commendations**

Each of the review team members was struck by the vitality, dedication, and genuine collegiality so evident among faculty, students, and staff. The faculty we met love and are devoted to their students and enjoy working with each other as colleagues. There are no contentious department meetings -- quite a rarity among English departments! Both full- and part-time faculty feel ably led by the Department Chair, whose "door is always open," and they know he

has their backs. The expert staff like working with faculty and feel supported by the Chair. Both faculty and staff praised the Chair for his transparency and attention. Students impressed us with their passion for learning and their love of the faculty. One graduate student described working as a tutor to undergraduates as “the greatest experience of my life.” To a person, these eight students planned to become teachers themselves -- a moving and inspiring testament to the culture of pedagogy that this department fosters across the board.

Proof of this vitality is shown in the extraordinary number of majors, which has not decreased over recent years, bucking the nationwide trend in the humanities. The department is extraordinarily robust, with its committed faculty of teacher-scholars, a diverse group of enthusiastic students, skilled staff, and an established department culture committed to thoughtfulness, fairness, transparency, and self-reflection. As detailed in the PPR report, the department has successfully navigated recent outside pressures and regulatory changes, especially for teaching remedial English and for preparing students to teach English. Their newly-developed minors, revamped advising strategies, successful alumni career panel, recently-revised assessment plans, and newly-established high impact practices -- including a cohorting strategy of one book for all incoming English majors, and a new capstone senior seminar -- are all impressive. Steering through an alphabet soup of partners, including SSMP, TESL, CBA, and EO 1110, and managing multiple budgets and targets, this department is successfully serving an impressive 10,000 students annually, including 520 undergraduate majors and 61 M.A. students -- all with only 18 FTEF.

## Challenges

Personnel is both this department’s strength and challenge. There is only one assistant professor in this thriving department and that concerns faculty about its future viability. Because so many faculty receive release-time successfully serving the college, university, and students, and because of recent retirements and departures, there is an overall shortage of tenured and tenure-track professors here. Evidence of this shortage comes directly from the PPR: “the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently ranked our department number 23 in the nation among public institutions for the number of English B.A. degrees awarded in 2017-18,” yet the department has 55% and 115% fewer T/TT faculty than CSU Northridge and Sacramento State, the only other CSU campuses to be ranked, but who produce fewer graduates than CSUF.

Gaps are especially noticeable in certain sub-disciplines. While professors of composition and rhetoric once numbered 4.5 FTEF, they currently number 1.75. Given the department’s commitment to the first-year writing program and to master’s student teacher-training, this number is staggeringly low. There are very few TT faculty to serve the new and growing minor in Creative Writing or to supervise the many composition courses this department teaches. The faculty shortage means that existing faculty feel overburdened and occasionally have to shift between administrative roles at a rate that might undermine the stability of the programs they administer. Other consequences of this faculty shortage are that, occasionally, students struggle to enroll in courses required for graduation. The department’s new capstone course contains 40

students, an unwieldy size for a writing seminar, although the department already has plans to reduce that number. One faculty member suggested that the student achievement gap could be narrowed if more time were available for more faculty to better mentor under-represented students.

As well as bucking the nationwide trend in declining English majors, this department has also defied recent trends to de-emphasize the classic canon of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton. Students and faculty appreciate mastering these foundational authors, but some acknowledge that there is room to add other major authors, perhaps on a rotating basis, to diversify the curriculum and perhaps better serve CSUF's diverse student body.

Other challenges reach beyond the department or even college to resolve. Recently-increased delays processing community college transfer transcripts create a burden on the English department staff, as students struggle to know which developmental and first-year English classes in which to enroll. Room availability limits the chance for professors to teach the 60-person sections that are useful to maintaining their important 3/3 teaching load. Library renovations recently have deemphasized the physical books that are important to this department, even while computer labs for writing classes are also not as widely available as they might be. More institutional structures to reward the faculty's impressive student mentoring would be welcomed, especially structures supporting student research in independent studies and capstone projects.

## **Recommendations**

This department has successfully demonstrated its ability to reflect upon itself -- both in its ongoing, open-ended, iterative assessment procedures as well as in its informal department culture -- in order to make wise adjustments and thrive. This department contains a wealth of administrative skills at multiple levels. Therefore, our specific recommendations are suggestions only.

We recommend the department hire at the very least three new tenure-track faculty, including at least one in composition/rhetoric and one in global Anglophone literature. While we recognize that the college and university use specific formulas to calculate tenure density and student-to-faculty ratios, we encourage them to consider the persuasive argument made in the PPR regarding the relationship between the department's actual course offerings, reassigned time for service, work, and T/TT density (27).

We encourage the faculty to consider diversifying their curriculum while maintaining their considerable strengths and successes. Diversifying the curriculum does not necessarily have to come at the expense of western canonical literature. One approach might be to require two single-author courses, one in the current menu and another in a 20th or 21st century menu consisting of underrepresented writers. Or the "single author" requirement of Chaucer and Milton could be replaced with a requirement for two pre-1800 classes. Also, we encourage the

department to keep DEI issues in mind when hiring outside of literary studies, as well. Excellent work is being done in disability rhetorics, for instance, and in queer rhetorics. We believe that diversifying the curriculum may encourage some progress in narrowing the achievement gap.

To help facilitate this curricular work we encourage the dean to consider a diversity cluster hire. This model has been highly successful at other institutions, including Cal Poly. The idea isn't to hire faculty from diverse backgrounds, though certainly that's a wonderful outcome if it happens. Instead, it's to create a network of faculty from different disciplines whose research and teaching center on issues of DEI. Creating a scholarly community like this helps attract candidates to the university because they know they'll have a cohort of faculty with whom they can collaborate. Additionally, it helps departments critically examine the ways their disciplines engage with issues of DEI.

The department and college can work to seek out rooms for 60-person classes and writing labs, and further publicize its new minors. Alleviating the room shortage may include exploring scheduling more evening classes, which students requested, although we are not certain that this small sampling of students was representative. Here, too, the department might benefit from college-level analysis of room usage. Sometimes scheduling patterns are simply repeated from semester to semester, resulting in the same departments receiving priority for the same classrooms. Perhaps the college could run a query into classroom usage to determine whether it is equitable across all departments.

Class sizes run high for all types of courses, especially composition courses. Capped at 25 (ENGL 101, GE A2) and 20 (ENGL 101P, developmental composition), these courses exceed the recommendations set forth by the [Association of Departments of English](#) (ADE). The ADE recommends that composition courses contain no more than 15-20 students, with developmental courses capping at no more than 15. Creative writing courses (27) and literature courses (40 and 60) similarly exceed ADE recommendations of literature courses enrolling no more than 35 students (25 in a writing-intensive literature course). While these figures are largely aspirational in today's higher education world, they nevertheless provide a helpful reminder that the teaching of writing--something that occurs in every single course in the department--brings with it particular requirements of faculty time. We encourage the university to recognize the valuable service English faculty do in teaching writing and writing-intensive courses, especially given the importance of writing skills in the university's [Undergraduate Student Learning Goals and General Education Learning Goals](#). Such a recognition would entail rethinking how the number of students-per-professor-per-semester is calculated, for the sake of both just pay and quality teaching. The amount of time an English professor puts into just two writing workshops of 15 students each is at least as much as, if not more than, what a professor puts into an introductory lecture course of 120 students. The blanket use of the same criteria for adjudging where tuition dollars are being spent is an unfortunate result of the fixation on quantitative metrics and data that ignore the quality of an education for the sake of the bottom line. We understand the pressures on the dean and the university at large to balance budgets, but we nevertheless urge the university to find ways to recognize the additional burden of writing

instruction on English faculty by decreasing the overall number of students they are expected to teach each semester.

The faculty may also want to review the successes of their newly-instituted high impact practices in advising, cohort-forming, and the capstone seminar, focusing in particular on the effect of these new practices on the achievement gap.

The department and college can explore methods to continue balancing faculty service and teaching, seeking out structures to reward faculty mentoring of students.

While the part-time faculty we spoke with are generally pleased with their working environment, they did request opportunities to engage in professional development opportunities and to create more community with each other and the tenure-line faculty. One faculty member indicated that they continued teaching at a local community college, in fact, because that college funded professional development opportunities. We encourage the department and college to consider providing some funding for part-time faculty to attend conferences and workshops; doing so benefits the faculty members as well as the students they teach.

The department, college, or other offices within CSUF may choose to work with others to expedite processing of community college transcripts. This issue is not unique to CSUF, but does create an additional burden on the department staff.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this department is to be commended for its considerable successes, ongoing culture of self-improvement, and enormous number of students served with a remarkably small faculty. The dedication of students, staff, and faculty is truly inspiring. It was a pleasure to serve as PPR reviewers for this department.