

**External Review Report
Department of English – Undergraduate Program
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville**

**External Reviewer: Dr. Jeanette McVicker, SUNY Fredonia
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The faculty and leadership of the SIUE Department of English should be commended for producing a thorough self-study that clearly documents careful reflection on the last external program review in the context of the many changes that have taken place within the disciplinary strands (linguistics, literary analysis, creative writing) brought together within the department. The self-study reveals a department that has undertaken assessment in a meaningful, self-determining manner, using mandated reviews to help it gain greater clarity for its own strategic planning while inviting university administrators to support its many student-centered and professionally-oriented initiatives. Such initiatives, crucial for student success at a time when the department has experienced rapid growth, are labor-intensive. They require commitments beyond the department: library and technological support, adequate workplace facilities, support for professional development and appropriate release time for departmental administration. It is my hope that this external review can be helpful to all stakeholders participating in the department's review process.

B. Are the students meeting the program's student-learning benchmarks or outcomes?

Based on available data, yes:

a. Does the program assess student learning adequately?

The department has strengthened its assessment process for the undergraduate program in the past year and a half, and as a result will be able to generate a more holistic set of data reflecting how well its programmatic changes are impacting student learning. For this review, the department surveyed its undergraduates and compiled data in several critical areas; students indicate that they feel the program prepares them according to their expectations, that the faculty are meeting their expectations, etc. The fact that the department has seen its full-time undergraduate major numbers increase significantly (up 69 % since 1999) demonstrates that students are attracted to the department. Additionally, alumni survey data suggests that graduates find jobs in their chosen fields or seek advanced degrees and report that the department prepared them well for these endeavors. While such data is helpful, it is general rather than specific; thus the department has added, since the last external review, several layers to its assessment: it has implemented changes to the Senior Seminar, including the addition of public presentations of students' Senior Assignment projects. It has designed an extensive rubric to measure student papers that will be collected in a digital portfolio system. It has involved more faculty in the assessment process through creation of a new faculty subcommittee of the existing curriculum committee, which will score the portfolios following a series of norming sessions, in coordination with the Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS). Finally, every fall semester, the DUS will provide a random sampling of 20 % of the previous year's digital portfolios to the department's Blackboard site for the department's assessment committee to read, in order to discuss trends occurring in student work and how the data can generate useful strategic

conversations in the department for the academic year. This horizontal, comparative process will certainly give the department much more extensive data about its students and its program than it has had available previously, starting with this academic year.

b. What changes have been made in the program as a result of assessment?

The changes made to the program as a result of assessment and national trends are extensive and substantial. In response to the last external review, for example, the department has completely redesigned the structure of and requirements for its two majors (which are discussed more extensively below), rethought and streamlined its course offerings, overhauled its assessment process and improved the interface of the department's programs with the goals of the university. The department has redefined and streamlined departmental administrative responsibilities, putting the DUS in charge of supervising the student advising process as it transitions on campus, among other responsibilities. The department has also streamlined the coordination of English 101 and 102, adding a training seminar for graduate assistants, making course materials available on the web for all instructors teaching the course, eliminating the final exam and adding a more appropriate portfolio assessment of student learning for the course.

c. Are the changes appropriate to reflect continuous improvement?

All the changes undertaken by the department are appropriate to the overall goal of enhancing student learning, providing professional opportunities for student majors in the program and after graduation, and creating multiple layers of assessment for reflecting upon continuous improvement. The changes additionally realign faculty research and teaching, bring the department's curriculum more firmly into contemporary conversations within the discipline, and engage the department more significantly with the surrounding community. These changes do not come without some potential negatives, however, particularly in regard to increased faculty workload in assessment duties. There is also likely to be significant impact on key departmental administrators, such as the DUS.

C. Do the curriculum and the courses support the student-learning benchmarks or outcomes?

The changes to the two major program curricula and three minor program curricula support the program's newly adopted student learning benchmarks, and the new assessment process supports appropriate reflection upon those outcomes.

a. Is the curriculum based upon a solid core of knowledge that supports the entire learning experience for students?

The changes to the undergraduate curricula reflect contemporary trends in the discipline and engage students in an intensive experience with language systems, literature and critical analysis, writing and oral expression, research and self-reflection. The English major and English Education major curricula are fully integrated with the university's general education requirements and provide for professional-learning environments (internships, service learning, student teaching, etc.). The new portfolio assessment system will additionally foster greater metacognition among the students and give faculty many more opportunities to monitor student learning.

b. Are the course content and the program of study of sufficient intellectual rigor? Does the program immerse students in the discipline?

Faculty responded in a departmental survey for this review that intellectual rigor and student preparation for coursework could be improved: only 50 % thought the program was rigorous; 46 % believed that grades accurately reflect student learning; 35 % felt students come to the program with adequate background knowledge; 38 % believed the program adequately prepares students for external licensure. These are findings that clearly prompted many of the changes undertaken to the structures of the majors, to the course content and descriptions, and to the more rigorous program goals and assessments to measure their success. The changes to the program should lead to much greater rigor in the program. Faculty might set aside discussion time for what grades mean in the various core courses in order to improve the integrity of course grades in reflecting student learning. The new major requirements should also improve the quality of students who apply to these programs.

Students report satisfaction with the intellectual rigor in the program: 81 % believed their critical thinking had grown as a result of the program; 80 % reported that the program increased their creative thinking. As mentioned above, alumni believe the program prepares them well for their intended careers or advanced degrees.

c. Does the program provide the students with appropriate opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills (internships, practica, fieldwork, laboratories, assistantships, research, papers, theses)?

The department has many appropriate opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills, and has taken steps to increase the kinds of opportunities with the new program requirements being implemented this year. English majors have many opportunities to write papers, engage in research, develop major presentations (senior assignment, for example), as well as engage in student teaching if they are education majors. Additionally, the department offers hands-on publishing skills through the major literary journals hosted by the department.

D. Does the environment support student-learning benchmarks or outcomes?

Yes, though the physical environment is in need of attention and greater support by the campus.

a. Is there sufficient institutional support for the learning environment (library collection, equipment, computing, laboratories/studios, resources, etc)?

The library collection and availability of smart classrooms seem minimally adequate to both students and faculty as reported in questionnaires distributed for this review. However, faculty report that if more smart classrooms were available for use by the department, this would enhance the learning environment. The administration should make more electronic classrooms available to the department in order to allow faculty to utilize new technologies and to prevent disruption to the course offerings schedule.

The working environment experienced by faculty, particularly graduate teaching assistants, adjunct faculty and instructors, however, seems to be in serious need of attention. When graduate assistants and part-time faculty are pressed together into shared, cramped office space, this negatively impacts both the morale of the instructors and diminishes the privacy of teacher-student conferences, tutoring and mentoring. If such spaces do not come with adequate access to

technology, this negatively impacts faculty efficiency, productivity and morale. The same is true of the workspaces devoted to the English journals, all of which utilize students, giving them crucial access to editing, layout, publishing. If all the journals are forced into one workspace, this will have negative implications for the learning environments associated with these laboratory spaces.

b. Does the program provide adequate mentoring/advising for students?

The program does provide adequate mentoring and advising for students, based on the questionnaires distributed to faculty and students. The advising situation is in the process of undergoing significant change, however, with a professional, central advising center on the horizon. The DUS will supervise and coordinate advising and mentoring within the department, with the help of tenured faculty. The new advising center will handle the nuts and bolts of registration and other aspects of ensuring students have proper access to knowledge about their programs. Faculty in the department will transition to a mentoring model, and have indicated that they will need to come up with creative ways to encourage students to meet with them once a mandatory advising/registration appointment is no longer necessary. Advising is more than filling out registration sheets, however. While the campus move to a centralized advising center will relieve faculty of some of the more tedious bureaucratic tasks associated with advising, the face-to-face interaction of mentoring will and should continue to be a faculty task. For more on how advising etc. impacts particular administrative duties in the department please see item E-f.

c. Does the program set a standard of excellence?

Yes. Students report in high percentages that they see faculty as role models in their discipline; the strong turnover in faculty during the review period has not diminished and may well have enhanced an already high standard of excellence in the program: faculty are engaged in significant, innovative research, publication, grant writing, international endeavors and other forms of scholarship. The journals housed within the department set an important standard of excellence for students to follow as it allows them access to scholarly and creative work by artists and scholars beyond campus. Similarly, the visiting lecture/artists series has provided a standard of excellence that benefits both faculty and students as well as others on the campus. The department has also instituted a digital portfolio system of assessment for its students which will allow greater access to their own developmental growth in the major, which helps them establish meaningful standards for themselves. The ability to increase the quality of its applicant and transfer pool by tightening admission standards and minimum grades for retention within the program contribute to the standard established by the department.

E. Major Findings:

This reviewer applauds the department for making hard choices about the effectiveness of long-standing requirements in its undergraduate major (e.g., courses on particular major authors; courses on specific periods of British and American literature) and for its willingness to open up possibilities for innovative course design under more generalized “topics“ categories. The faculty have also added components to the senior capstone course, helping establish greater rigor as well as more visibility for the scholarly work performed in the course. Finally, the assessment instruments have been completely rethought, allowing for specific kinds of data collection in the future. All these are significant steps for which the faculty should be congratulated.

Suggestions for further reflection:

a. Re: portfolio assessment and scoring: the department has established many important criteria for assessment of its undergraduate majors, based on a newly adopted digital portfolio. Having served on many portfolio scoring committees as a faculty member as well as chairperson of my own department, I can appreciate rewarding yet time-consuming task this will be. I note that the department distributes the scoring rubric to senior capstone students with the portfolio guidelines, and will also include these in the student handbook and on the website, so that all students are familiar with the benchmarks/goals of the program and how they will be evaluated in meeting them. These goals might also be tied to specific courses, so that faculty can state in their syllabi how a particular course helps students achieve the particular learning goals/outcomes of the program, and which the portfolio will also measure. In other words, insure that the programmatic learning outcomes are consistently transparent at all levels: handbook/advising sheets/website, course syllabi, portfolio assessment. This will help “close loops“ and also ease the reporting of the assessments on an annual basis by the Director of Undergraduate Studies and Chair.

My own department wrangled over how to invite students to complete their portfolios; after several years utilizing a model very much like the one being adopted by this department, in the end we let go of the idea of writing prompts as potentially leading the students to say what we wanted to hear. While I commend SIUE’s department for initiating the portfolio in such a comprehensive way, there is something to be said for the perspective my own faculty in rhetoric and composition offered, i.e., that if the benchmarks and goals are communicated consistently and transparently across the curriculum, student papers (including the exit reflection) should be assessed without specifically encouraging students to tell us what we want to hear; instead, we should be prepared to let the portfolio papers demonstrate what they do on their own, which will give faculty a more honest assessment portrait of its program.

Further, the department has created nine goals, which as I read the self-study, it plans to assess in full every year. This is an arduous amount of assessment. Moreover, the goal of such an assessment may be even better accomplished if the department selected, for example, three benchmarks/goals per year for its focus. In three years’ time, the department will have assessed all of its student learning outcomes/goals without the burden of having to score all portfolios on all outcomes each year. This seems even more important for the 20 % sampling that the DUS will provide to the department at the beginning of each new academic year, giving the faculty a chance to truly focus on particular goals in a given year. Streamlining the assessment in this way will help maintain faculty cooperation in the assessment process without overburdening them at a time when they have just engaged in a labor-intensive project of assessing the senior capstone presentations and paper assignment.

b. Re: the senior capstone conference presentations: This is another innovation being put into place this year, and it has the potential to enhance students’ sense of completion of the program while also offering a visible, public showcase for student research and creativity. Might it be even better if the panels were not running concurrently, so that students would be able to support each other by attending their presentations? Perhaps by spreading out the event across a morning and afternoon, or over two evenings, the sense of community which seems to be part of the purpose, might be more easily accomplished. I also wondered what would happen if a student

missed the senior presentation: would s/he fail the seminar and have to retake it? I didn't see a contingency plan for that event. And a more trivial question: if all undergraduate majors take Senior Seminar, listed as ENG 497a, is there an ENG 497b in the works?

c. Re: new requirements for the majors in English and English Education: The department's decision to overhaul its major in nearly every area over the past several years cannot be praised enough by this reviewer. It represents a remarkable achievement, for it not only accomplishes the goal of bringing the program into line with contemporary trends in English Studies, it maintains and expands strong foundations in writing, analysis and critical thinking while giving students and faculty greater exposure to the exciting cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary engagements taking place in the field today. Further, the additional survey courses will help ground students more firmly in the rich connections between the transatlantic and global. The addition of a major author course on Toni Morrison is a significant and worthy effort to bring the major author course into the 21st century, but the two new major author categories (Shared Traditions and Crossing Boundaries) are even more innovative, in that they will allow faculty to come up with creative pairings, putting the present in more overt dialogue with the past and inviting students to tackle the idea of canon-formation. All of these changes are substantive and will surely generate excitement among students, tap the creativity of the faculty, and lead to rich sources for public events on campus and in the community. The new major should also assist students going on to teaching as well as graduate school. Students in English BA+TCERT will also benefit from the streamlining and additional elective choices in the new program, better preparing them for the multi-cultural knowledges they'll need for teaching in K-12 classrooms and beyond. That students from both programs come back together in the culminating senior capstone course is an interesting aspect of this undergraduate program; there are benefits of having a dedicated senior seminar for the BA+TCERT major, as a reflection upon the student teaching experience and topics that will face students as they enter the teaching field that might well be worth pursuing.

d. Re: diversity in the program: The department has made a significant effort to diversify its core course offerings in the major by including a required course on the work of African-American writer Toni Morrison. The retirement of the distinguished Black scholar Eugene B. Redmond, and the completion of the run of the journal he edited (*Drumvoices Revue*), is significant, especially during a time when the department is seeking to increase its pool of African-American and other minority students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. While the addition of new faculty in other disciplinary areas, and the launch of a new journal on medieval cultural studies are truly exciting, the department should work very hard to not only recruit more minority faculty but also to consider new collaborations with the existing interdisciplinary program in Black Studies, in order to offer students the kinds of engaged writing and creativity that *Drumvoices Revue* encouraged and which the Redmond Writers Club and Black Literary Guild will no doubt continue to support.

e. Re: increasing numbers of majors vs. number of tenure-track lines: The department has nearly doubled the numbers of its majors since the last review and the numbers of graduate students it serves is also on the increase. Yet, the number of tenured/tenure-track lines has not kept pace with that increase. The additions the department has made to the kinds of courses that will be offered, the conference presentation requirement in its senior capstone, and the assessment of the program will add time to an already busy faculty. As we know from the recent MLA data and the

Winter-Spring 2009 special joint issue of the *ADE and ADFL Bulletin*, the trend toward hiring more FTLs and part-time faculty is having a negative impact on departments of English across the country. SIUE could explore the conversion of some of its FTL lines to tenure-track, especially for those that are currently filled with holders of doctoral and MFA degrees. The department is surely deserving of new lines, and has clearly established a positive relationship with its non-tenured faculty. Such conversions are one way to invest in departments that are achieving university goals while preserving the integrity of professionalism.

f. Re: release time for administrative responsibilities within the department: This reviewer – a former department chair and interdisciplinary program coordinator in a home department with a 3-4 annual teaching load – was struck with the level of responsibilities performed by the Director of Undergraduate Studies particularly (this is true also of the Director of Graduate Studies, which will be discussed in the second report) and other administrative positions, such as the coordinator of English Education. Realizing that release time is an increasingly precious commodity, this review makes a very strong recommendation to the administration to maintain release time arrangements for faculty who contribute their expertise and time to the healthy implementation of the department's new program. The new assessment model will require significant attention by the DUS in particular: ensuring student participation, leading faculty norming sessions, supervising and coordinating portfolio scoring sessions, culling a random sample and presenting findings to the faculty at the beginning of each new academic year are only the beginning. In order for portfolio systems to work smoothly, the department must also engage in regular conversations about what the findings show, invite students to complete exit surveys (perhaps) in addition to finalizing their portfolios, tracking alumni through surveys, etc. and presenting the department chair and assessment office with regular reports that suggest fine-tuning, how to circumvent problems etc. As this reviewer is also on an NCATE campus in a department with an English Education major, I know that the responsibilities of the English Education coordinator can be enough to drive him/her from the profession. The coordination of the students and faculty in English as well as in the Speech program (for the required minor) and in Education alone is extremely intense; working to insure that students are ready for annual screening and file reviews adds a burden that no centralized Advising Center will be able to accommodate. Thus, this review steadfastly supports the current system of providing a course release per year for the DUS and DGS and one each semester for the coordinator of English Education. The same sort of responsibilities are placed on directors/coordinators of expository writing, especially in supervising such a large staff of part-time faculty and graduate assistants. SIUE clearly values writing instruction and should continue to insure that the faculty who coordinate such programs are given adequate release time to accomplish it well. Without such recognition, faculty should not be asked to engage in such service. The new advising arrangement will not minimize the burden on these positions an iota and should not be used as a reason to pull the release time.

F: Rating: Exemplary. The department has commenced an exciting new stage in its growth. This year marks a critical period of change to its undergraduate program and the addition of well-devised yet labor-intensive assessment tools. Finding the right balance among all the new parts of the program will be the task of the department over the next several years. This reviewer wishes the faculty well in that endeavor.