To: Dean Scott Furlong

From: Steve Dutch, chair of the Academic Affairs Council

Date: March 4, 2011

Re: Academic Affairs Council Review of the English Program

Introduction:

The AAC received and reviewed the English Program report in the fall of 2010. The document was written and submitted by the department Chair, Professor Bryan Vescio. After reviewing the report, AAC members invited Professor Vescio to answer questions and to elaborate on the current state and future position of their program.

Overview

The English Program occupies a pivotal position at UWGB by teaching communication and critical reasoning skills. 90 per cent of English credits generated at the lower level satisfy General Education requirements. In addition it exposes students to a diversity of perspectives and provides historical understanding of the development of English-speaking culture. The English Program offers three areas of emphasis: Creative Writing, Literature, and English Education. Roughly half of English majors choose the English Education track, with the remainder about evenly divided between Literature and Creative Writing.

The English Program is a large one with the number of declared majors ranging from 148 in 2005 to 179 in 2009, but minors declined from 44 to 27 in the same period. The decline in minors may reflect job requirements for teaching, with more students opting to major rather than minor in English. Total headcount in all courses rose from 953 in 2005 to 1226 in 2009. Student credit hours increased from 2682 in 2005 to 3456 in 2009. Headcount and student credit hours rose sharply between 2008 and 2009. Whether this change is long term or a spike remains to be seen. Over a four year period, the English Program teaches an average of ten unique lower division classes and 20 upper division classes, numbers that are very stable. The fact that a stable, large program with a central place in the curriculum has seen variations in enrollment and student credit hours of 20 per cent and more during a five year period underscores the volatility of enrollment trends in even the largest program, and the inadvisability of making long term resource decisions based on highly fluctuating metrics.
Curriculum

The English curriculum has a somewhat unusual structure. It has the standard campus-wide mix of lower-level Supporting Courses and upper level major courses, but in addition, the students’ courses must satisfy five criteria which cut across categories and include courses at both lower and upper levels. The five criteria are:

1. Pre-1800 British Literature other than Shakespeare (Shakespeare is required for all majors)
2. Post-1800 British Literature
3. American Literature
4. Study of Language (including at least six credits of foreign language)
5. World Literature

Although the mix of lower and upper level courses at first appeared puzzling, the Chair made a persuasive case during the AAC review that it did not penalize students in any way but rather enhanced flexibility. That is, a student who took a course fulfilling a certain criterion at the lower level was not deprived of upper level credits, but was actually enabled to take other courses more suited to the student’s needs. He stressed that the English Program does not want narrowly defined tracks but prefers breadth.

Another innovative curriculum feature is a course, English 290, Literary Studies, which exposes students to the specific skills required in the English discipline, specifically reading and writing about research, methods of literary study, and critical thinking.

The English Program has also created two lower division survey courses in world literature. This shift of topics from the upper to the lower level, coupled with the criterion concept, has freed the program to offer more variable credit at the upper level, although one of the most persistent student comments is a desire for still more diversity in courses.

A widespread tension in English programs at many institutions is balancing the traditional canon of English literature, sometimes disparaged as “dead white males,” with the need to incorporate more modern and diverse writings by women, minorities and writers from less developed nations. There is only limited time available in a student’s college career, and choosing one desirable option necessarily precludes others. The English Program is sensitive to both needs, and while it remains solidly rooted in the traditional canon, also attempts to balance that emphasis with a broader range of perspectives as well.
Assessment

Although English, like all units on campus, is grappling with the issue of assessment, they seem to have made more concrete use of their assessments than many other programs. Most significant is the development of the English 290 course, a general overview of methods common to English studies. This material had formerly been covered by an upper level course, but comments from graduating seniors frequently expressed a wish that they had learned those skills much earlier. The former upper-level course still exists but has been renamed and is now a variable topics course that focuses on more specific topics in literary criticism.

The English Program no longer uses the ETS examination because of a conviction that the exam is not suitable for assessing Creative Writing. Instead, the assessment plan now is to use student portfolios consisting of one paper written for English 290 and a second paper written for an upper level course, both papers to be submitted electronically. This plan is being phased in since English 290 was only recently developed and there are still graduating students who did not have it, as well as recent students who have not yet submitted the second paper.

All of the members of the AAC have participated in multiple program reviews and seen the varying approaches programs have made, and continue to make, in developing assessment methods. It is becoming apparent that there is no substitute for the informed judgment of professionals in the various disciplines. It is necessary to be able to articulate to outsiders what the program hopes to achieve, supply evidence that the goals are being met, and document remedial measures if goals are not being met, but ultimately the most sound assessment will be based on individual professional judgment. We commend the English Program for making constructive use of its assessments to date and encourage the continued refinement of methods.

The most important assessment of the program is how its graduates perform in the real world. The Education students, for the most part, find work in Education. Students in other tracks have gone on to work in editing, publishing or marketing, or enroll in law school. A few graduates have published in literary outlets. One has a tenure track appointment at a two-year UW Center. Although admission to graduate school in English is highly competitive, an increasing number of students are selecting that option.

Resources

The English Program is fortunate in two important respects. First, there is a large pool of qualified community members capable of teaching on an ad hoc basis should the need arise. Second, the program is large enough that it rarely has to sacrifice upper level courses with low enrollments to staff larger, lower level courses. Smaller programs are frequently in the position of cancelling upper level courses because faculty members are diverted to other needs or
unavailable due to illness or sabbatical. Although there are legitimate institutional reasons why such painful cuts are necessary, students hoping to take the cancelled courses are understandably irritated. The large size of the English Program protects it from such pressures to some extent.

Advising in English generally works smoothly. There is generally no problem in teaching courses according to periodicity. The faculty generally seem to enjoy the variety of courses and find it stimulating. The ability to cover courses in their own specialty is a strong morale booster.

The English Program continues to have a number of unrealized future goals. One is the eventual creation of an American Studies Program, which would be an interdisciplinary program in Humanistic Studies to which English would contribute. There would probably not be a need for new courses, but rather, existing courses in American Literature would suffice. The other goal is the creation of a Film Studies track. Since visual media are increasingly the vehicle for expressing ideas formerly expressed in books, the desirability of such a program struck the AAC as obvious. It is not so obvious how the resources would be acquired. Most upper level English courses have a film component. That arrangement may be necessary, but it dilutes both the print and film content of the courses. The most immediate change envisioned is the creation of a screen writing course, a course that has obvious potential for employment of graduates.

One respect in which English differs from similar programs at many other institutions is that it is separate from English Composition. The program noted in its self study that it would be almost impossible to perform its mission if it also had to cover Composition with the existing resources. Although the organizational separation of the subject areas is perhaps unusual, the use of other faculty to teach Composition is not much different from the way Mathematics uses lecturers to cover its remedial and pre-calculus courses.

**Conclusion**

The English Program is a large program with a well developed sense of direction and identity, an evolving assessment methodology, and informed perspectives on balancing the needs of the program, faculty and students with available resources.

Previously submitted questions from the AAC were discussed during the review but no written responses have been supplied.

Cc: AAC members (Steven Dutch, Christine Style, Mimi Kubsch, Woo Jeon, Dennis Lorenz)
Professor Bryan Vescio, Chair English
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