

Report for the Department of English and Philosophy  
Program Review for English / American Studies

Team Visit Wednesday, April 14, 2004

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## **TENURE-TRACK FACULTY**

The English department's 21 full-time faculty members appear to be a fine group. They are well qualified in their fields and capable both as teachers and researchers. While there are some disagreements about curriculum within the department, there is a collegial atmosphere and a general sense that the department is a good place to work.

The tenure track faculty includes 12 men and 9 women, with one member who has minority status. The department attempts to hire minority candidates, and has been able to invite minority candidates to campus for interviews, but in recent years has not been able to hire a minority candidate. While this is common at Idaho State University, it is good not to become complacent about **the issue of diversity**. The review team recommends that the department consider additional avenues of recruitment, such as sponsoring promising minority candidates in their doctoral programs at other institutions in the region (in whatever manner the department can do so), and creating two-year post-doc positions that bring in minority candidates. A long-term idea is to attract minority candidates at the master's level, who, if viewed as promising future faculty, may be encouraged to continue into doctoral studies elsewhere, and assisted in those studies (again, in whatever manner the department can do so), with the intention of offering a post-doc and possibly a tenure track position in the future.

## **CURRICULUM:**

### **English Studies:**

Overall, the department has done a good job maintaining the liberal arts core of the department's mission in the face of budget pressures and higher education's continuing move towards vocational instruction. Yet some faculty members expressed some dissatisfaction with the requirements of the degree and the ways in which courses are allocated. One faculty member expressed an interest in a more **unified curriculum**, and would like a better-defined creative writing program. Another described the curriculum as stodgy, with specialty areas not easily accommodated.

One key issue is that the configuration of the "coverage" model in effect predetermines both course scheduling, and, thus, hiring. Three courses in the major are required in periods, half of them in the earlier periods, and "major authors," defined as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton, and one "wild card" course. Because these required courses

must be offered and staffed, some faculty members feel the curriculum limits the development of new courses and emphases.

The reviewers observed that the department needs to make some choices about how best to shape the curriculum in the coming years. There seems to be a division between a traditional 'coverage model' curriculum organized by period, and a more modern thematically organized curriculum. In other words, the literature faculty seemed to have divergent ideas of their mission. We would not recommend one over the other to this group, but feel strongly that the department should decide openly and clearly which way to direct its limited energies. Emphasizing particular strengths or areas of excellence can help departments and universities develop a discrete identity, helpful in attracting students and funding.

### **American Studies Program**

The American Studies Program is ably led by Professor Jennifer Attebery, a well regarded scholar in folklore. The committee was especially impressed with the diversity of offerings from many departments, creating a truly interdisciplinary major. While the number of majors is relatively small, it serves ISU well in two ways: 1) a demanding small program attracts and provides challenges for the best students and 2) following the trends in the disciplines, accrediting agencies are very interested in interdisciplinarity and encouraging universities to provide some interdisciplinary programs.

The American Studies Program faces some challenges. Several people pointed out to the committee that the curriculum was very strong in British Literature and relatively weak in American literature. Within the English department, ironically the home of American Studies, there are not enough courses to crosslist. Those who supported more courses in American literature made comments such as: "The curriculum is really stodgy and it hamstrings us. New people coming in can't teach their specialties."

The program director does not receive any release time. This leaves the director time only for maintenance of the program. The program has too little visibility, particularly outside ISU. This review team strongly recommends release time for the director, which would enable her to expand grant writing, program building, and especially public programming to attract positive attention to American Studies and to ISU. Even without that release time, Professor Attebery has taken some of these steps by beginning to co-sponsor Idaho Yesterdays and promoting an Idaho Yesterdays lecture by an important figure in the field. These two steps, and other public outreach, offer opportunities to ISU to attract donors from the public sector and to bring ISU the positive PR so central to increased funding in higher education these days.

## **Composition Program**

The department is carrying out well its goals in composition and pedagogy. The composition program, headed by Margaret Johnson, is notable for its many important roles. This program is the department's biggest connection with ISU's undergraduate students, it employs the largest number of adjunct faculty, it works closely with computer/technology and distance learning systems, and it seems to be leading the way on assessment. The Composition Committee meets regularly to review portfolios and check their grading standards across the faculty. The committee thus examines student outcomes while maintaining clear goals for faculty. In a discipline where demonstrable outcome assessment is at best awkward, the ISU composition program is a model of excellence.

## **Online Courses and Writing Center**

The technology and writing faculty appear to have considerable energy and a clear sense of mission, which is a fine thing so long as the rest of the faculty feel involved or at least content with that same mission. (Some distrust of online courses was expressed by longtime faculty.) The department's efforts to develop online courses are well conceived and ably administered by Keith Comer. The decision to initiate the online program with three core courses and to devote considerable planning to careful assessment is a good one. The interface between the online program and the writing center, headed by Stephen Adkison, is clearly productive. Both directors are knowledgeable about new directions in the fields and willing to consider innovations—practical and scholarly—but are also aware of pitfalls and possible overextension. While these two areas are proceeding well and administrators expressed no complaints about support, success should reap benefits, especially given the directions in higher education today toward writing across the curriculum and online courses, both of which require technical support staffs.

## **Graduate Studies**

The department offers the Master of Arts and the Doctor of Arts. Both degrees focus on broad knowledge of literature rather than on specialization. While the "breadth" over "specialization" model can make it difficult for a department or university to make known its particular strengths in order to attract students, graduate director Brian Attebery emphasized that ISU Doctor of Arts students had an excellent record of getting teaching jobs, sometimes in research universities in addition to the two- and four-year colleges for which the degree is designed. The committee suggests that the department add to their graduate website some information about former students and the jobs they have procured in order to demonstrate the value of the D.A.

Graduate students who met with the review team seemed generally enthusiastic about their programs, particularly appreciative of the accessibility of the faculty. They expressed interest in seeing the department develop certification in the teaching of

English as a second language, particularly useful in attaining jobs. They expressed a need for more specific guidance regarding preparation for comprehensive exams, and pointed out that a graduate committee has the topic under discussion.

There appears to be a need to initiate a review of the graduate programs' comprehensive examinations, with a view toward more closely aligning the comprehensive examination process with programmatic requirements and resources, including re-examination of graduate curricula to reflect changes in the fields of literary, composition, and linguistic studies.

### **FULL-TIME, NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY**

The English department employs a pool of 19 full-time, non-tenure-track faculty. These full-time adjuncts teach a heavy load of 4/4 with 75% or more of their load in composition classes. The adjunct/instructor pool in the English department appears to be a strong one, but such a heavy reliance on adjunct workers necessitates close attention to the morale and the quality of their teaching. The review committee recognizes that the move to make these adjuncts full-time but non-tenurable is one way to cope with the university's demand for composition teaching at a reduced cost. Yet the percentage of courses taught by adjunct faculty is high, and it is clear that with a majority of the department's classes taught by this group, the department would do well to articulate a clear plan for their integration into the life of the curriculum and the community. The director of composition and the writing program in general seem to be doing good work in this direction with an assessment panel for norming student paper grades and with other work by the Composition Committee.

Clearly resources are a limitation, but these faculty members would benefit from better computer support, more support for development, and continued help with salaries.

We recommend that the department continue efforts to engage and integrate these valuable members of the teaching community. Further, the department would do well to discuss and decide as a group that their educational mission is best served by this distribution of resources. As it stands the adjunct faculty composes a 'shadow department' of fine teachers and good workers, but with a 4/4 load and at \$26,700 to \$29,000 per year, they cannot contribute as much intellectual energy to the campus as their full time colleagues. This is in many ways a better system than the usual hiring of adjuncts, for it offers some job security and benefits, but whether it is the best system for ISU should be considered.

### **Assessment:**

The department's assessment plans for programs in English and in American Studies form solid bases for their ongoing assessment work. The committee notes the composition committee's work to determine if student papers are graded with

consistent criteria; the well-developed plans for assessment of online courses; the ongoing assessment projects in the writing center; and the student assessment plan that includes specific learning objectives and expected outcomes for each level of the program, and the capstone experiences for the various degrees offered. In order to facilitate communication of assessment efforts not listed in the departmental plans, the review team recommends the following. The next revision of the department / program assessment plans should

- a) Reflect current curriculum alignment discussion in departmental committees
- b) Reflect assessment methodologies used in the general education goals
- c) Reflect a mechanism for engaging other constituencies in assessing courses that serve a variety of programs and departments across campus
- d) Use language that reflects actual assessability, for example, in the Outcomes Assessment Matrices
- e) Reflect periodic review of course content, in order to ensure that the courses reflect the catalog descriptions, or that the descriptions reflect the content

The General Education Goal One assessments appear to be well developed.

### **Miscellaneous**

- 1) Everyone deserves a raise.
- 2) In future editions of the self-study, the department may wish to add wording that points to the English components of 18 and 30 credits in the Elementary Education program.