

Florida Atlantic University
Department of English
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
Program Review February 24-26, 2019
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During the evaluation visit the team met with:

- Associate Provost Russ Ivy
- Interim Dean of the Graduate College Khaled Sobhan
- English Tenured Faculty
- English Tenure-Stream Faculty
- English Instructors
- Executive Associate Vice President for Research Karin Scarpinato (DOR)
- English Chair Eric Berlatsky and Associate Chair Emily Stockard
- Dean of Undergraduate Studies Edward Pratt
- Graduate and Undergraduate Students
- Dean of Arts and Letters Michael Horswell

INTRODUCTION

The external reviewers, joined by Florida Atlantic Associate Professor Philomena Marinaccio, convened on February 24-26, 2019, to conduct the on-campus portion of a review of the English Department, which included meetings with university and college administrators, departmental administrators, faculty (both tenure track and non-tenure-eligible), graduate students, and undergraduates. Prior to our arrival, we also received a number of documents, including the Department of English self-study, faculty and instructor vitae, information about the department's graduate program, and the last review of this department conducted by Professor Marta Caminero-Santangelo of the University of Kansas. From time to time, we will reference this review (Caminero-Santangelo, 2012) but, for the most part, we will focus on the present condition of the department, providing a kind of SWOT analysis by identifying the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to excellence. In offering this analysis, this report provides impressions of what the department is doing well and what it needs to align with

FAU's strategic plan. Short- and long-term recommendations are organized into those requiring resources as well as non-resource based recommendations.

The report addresses the following: A) evaluation team observations with associated action recommendations, B) responses to the questions for reviewers posed at the end of the self-study, and C) a summary that prioritizes the most pressing suggested actions.

STRENGTHS OF FAU'S ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The strengths of FAU's English Department are many: a flexible undergraduate major, an accomplished tenured and tenure-stream faculty strengthened considerably by the recent hiring of promising assistant professors, a loyal and very hard working cohort of non-tenure-eligible instructors, and MA, MFA, and PhD students who—in spite of some serious challenges we shall enumerate below—remain dedicated to their work and teaching responsibilities. The departmental is also well-staffed and there is an overall sense that administrators in the department are doing an excellent job in both managing day-to-day department life and advocating for the department to the university. Administrators are established faculty who provide important institutional and organizational memory, and the administrative structure interior to the department works well. Human capital, therefore, is high in this department.

The department's self-study provided inarguable evidence of strong teaching on the graduate and undergraduate levels, and the vitae and research profiles of faculty display an ambitious range of research and pedagogical expertise well-suited to the diverse demographics of South Florida. Recent investment in queer theory, ecocriticism, book arts, and prison studies stood out in particular, and students praised "inquiry-driven" graduate and undergraduate classes. Tenured and tenure-stream faculty have consistently been hired from top programs and publish in prominent venues consistent with a research university.

Non-tenure-eligible instructors displayed expertise and confidence in their curriculums, and benefit from the relatively recent introduction of regular review; inclusion in department decisions, including voting rights (except on hiring decisions); and advancement to "senior instructor" status. We applaud the emergent roles of instructors as peer/grad mentors, particularly if paired with course releases or supplementary pay in the future.

Good mentoring is central to any well-functioning department, and several tenure-stream faculty members and instructors spoke with effusive praise about the ways they have been mentored in the department. The word "collegial" was often used, particularly among established faculty, to describe the atmosphere in the department. Several faculty mentioned reading for one another, giving feedback, and celebrating each other's accomplishments and publications. Furthermore,

there was also a sense that the chair represents the department well, and he was perceived as supportive, particularly among senior faculty.

We also saw a growing MFA applicant pool and, after accounting for national trends, a reasonably stable number of undergraduate majors: compared with national trends of 30-50% declines, FAU's major enrollment decline is modest, and even heartening. Graduate students in both the MA and MFA programs are benefitting from a recently separated advising structure between the MA and MFA programs. Undergraduates uniformly felt a sense of structure in the major, and expressed satisfaction with their choice of major. Notably, many undergraduate students stay on for graduate programs.

In relation to the university, the English Department's flexible horizontal major structure contributes positively to the SUS emphasis on metrics,¹ especially with regard to retention and timely progress and completion. The department provides extraordinary service to the university, especially in the form of IFP and writing courses that respond favorably to state metrics. In addition, many tenured faculty members, and to a certain degree those not yet tenured, serve on university-wide committees and devote a remarkable amount of time to service. Overall, the department's careful self-study and documented response to the last review (Caminero-Santangelo, 2012) show evidence of an ability and a willingness to continue to grow and evolve in response to university needs and nationwide changes in humanities education.

WEAKNESSES/AREAS OF CONCERN FOR FAU'S ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Two numbers simply leap out of the departmental self-study and are the cause of grave concern: first, both the teaching load and stipend earned by graduate students doing absolutely essential work for the college and university, and second, the pattern of tenure-stream attrition in the department. Here we must note that the last external review (Caminero-Santangelo, 2012) noted these weaknesses, which--a full seven years later--have not been addressed, and because of inflation, functionally have deepened. The urgency of dealing with these concerns is growing with the increasing costs of hiring junior faculty, ongoing changes to the university, a persistent emphasis on metrics, and a growing cost of living and healthcare. There are other numbers and issues of concern as well, but we feel these two require the most immediate attention.

Graduate Student Stipends and Benefits:

Together, the external reviewers come from areas of the country (Morgantown, West Virginia and Fayetteville, Arkansas) with much lower costs of living than Boca Raton. Yet our

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https://www.flbog.edu/board/office/budget/doc/performance_funding/Allocation-Year-5-2018-19-Revised-6_28_18.pdf

universities offer--and have offered for many years--stipends that are much higher. The University of Arkansas offers \$12,000/year for MA students (2-2 teaching load), with the option of 60% coverage of health insurance, and West Virginia University offers \$16,000/year with health insurance provided. In 2012, the external reviewer from the University of Kansas cited a similar gap and called the \$9000 stipend for graduate students “horrrifying.” Given that inflation now makes that closer to \$8,200 in 2012 dollars, we struggle to find more pointed adjectives--“shocking,” and “embarrassing” come to mind--but both reviewers agreed that at this funding rate, we would advise our own graduates against even applying to these programs. The current stipend is below the poverty line and, for international students not permitted to work at all beyond the GTA, is likely a deal-breaker.

Given this data, it is hardly surprising, as we learned while on campus, that graduate student morale is extremely low--our session with graduate students was characterized by the outrage associated with a labor strike. Nor is it surprising that several of the graduate students we met have two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet, and others are falling ever deeper into debt. Graduate student debt, as described by Jeffrey Williams in the January-February 2012 special issue of *Academe*, is creating an ever-expanding class of “indentured students” (Williams 10), and FAU is not helping to slow down this process. Given these data, the desideratum we heard of attracting even more graduate students to campus, particularly in what was described as a “growing” MFA program, seems decidedly unwise. Furthermore, it was clear in our visit that not providing health insurance coupled with low paying teaching assistant contracts had sobering effects: students described the pain of being uninsured, including repeatedly doing without necessary medicines, and not visiting a doctor when sick and in pain. As graduate students teaching a 2-2 load regularly interact with undergraduates--and need to be healthy to teach well--this state of affairs is untenable for the whole community. It also creates significant animosity in the program and towards the university, and ensures that the department graduates a roster of students who will not give back to the university in donations or positive word-of-mouth recommendations, and who do not have the time to create and critique on the level that they deserve and were promised at the time of admission. Simply put, they are struggling, exhausted, and angry at the precarious existence asked of them to pursue a degree.

We note that every constituency that we met agreed that this was a significant problem, but one that needed to be solved at the highest levels of university administration. Based on our own analysis, we see no other available options to resolve the issue without a significant influx of resources. Other potential solutions would compromise the department’s ability to offer the IFP courses in writing and literature most crucial to the entire undergraduate student body, and would potentially reduce the number of graduate degrees awarded.

Faculty Retention:

The retention of talented assistant professors came up over and over again. A wave of retirements and departures has made retention a starker concern in recent years, and ten full-time faculty have arrived in the past two years, making retention--a key item on the university's strategic plan--an urgent issue. This unusual circumstance foregrounds cultural features in the department that might be easily managed in smaller numbers; at this level, a shift in the department culture is almost inevitable. Among assistant professors, there is a perceived lack of clarity in matters related to tenure and promotion, particularly as they involve the assessment of collaborative work and digital scholarship/digital humanities projects. Davie campus assignments were a point of contention: the drive was described as onerous and dangerous, and faculty had concerns about the extremely late times they were asked to teach (7-10 pm), especially given the fact that many had responsibilities to young families. Associate professors spoke of the pressures of salary compression and limited opportunities for research time and course reductions for research.

Other Areas of Weakness

All other weaknesses pale in comparison to graduate student (teaching assistant) compensation and faculty retention, although a few other issues do warrant serious consideration. There are other areas of weakness or concern, all of which were related to us during our campus visit:

Graduate Teaching and Instruction:

- Graduate course offerings need to be scheduled so as to avoid unnecessary competition. MFA students had difficulty enrolling in the craft and workshop courses fundamental to the degree, and we spoke with some students who were completing their first year in this program and had not yet had a chance engage in the writing central to the MFA.
- TAs cited a sense that training in the teaching of composition and rhetoric was insufficient to their needs and experience. While we learned of a one-week summer seminar, a course in composition pedagogy, and a colloquium for new GTAs from writing program administrators, GTAs expressed concerns about not feeling prepared to undertake practical classroom management, and about not fully understanding the curriculum until they were deep into teaching. This is a matter of real concern, as poorly taught sections of introductory classes (even by passionate novices) will only further challenge FAU's progress with metrics, while also pulling potential majors away from declaring a degree in English. Further attention to ongoing mentoring structures for slightly more experienced but nonetheless newer instructors may also be valuable.

- The department's commitment to a coverage model at the graduate level, however commendable in principle, may be out of sync with national trends in the discipline and with the current TT faculty size. There was a sense that it was a multicultural literature "versus" canonical literature atmosphere, and faculty teaching inventive, cutting-edge methodology classes often felt discouraged from proposing them, for fear of the class not making. This is a discussion that must be undertaken with care: a diverse untenured faculty can learn from the pragmatic experience of established department leadership, but those same newer faculty also offer an essential breadth of perspective that a comparatively homogeneous tenured faculty must listen to with openness.
- Other more granular issues that arose include:
 - Ad hoc registration procedures for graduate courses (perhaps just around MFA courses) seemed in need of creative solutions;
 - Newer faculty require more deliberate mentoring for graduate teaching;
 - A systemic approach to teaching observations and evaluations may be useful for continuous improvement of pedagogy, especially on qualitative but not necessarily quantitative lines. Graduate students should ideally finish degree programs with a letter of teaching recommendation.
 - An expanded acknowledgement of mental health needs for graduate students and potentially even for instructors and newer faculty
 - Few-to-no summer teaching opportunities for graduate students to supplement funding gaps.

Department culture and outreach:

- There appears to have been some confusion or misunderstanding surrounding tenure stream faculty attrition and recent faculty recruitment efforts, including hiring procedures. We recommend increased training on best hiring practices with Inclusion, Diversity Education, and Advocacy, the equal opportunity employment office and/or the new ADVANCE initiative. Relatedly, we urge increased awareness and broader sensitivity across the department about how to report, handle, and resolve issues of harassment, student aggression, and complaints.
- The department lacks an organized plan to engage alumni of the department and potential donors. The departmental newsletter, for example, will be published this year, but the regular publication of a newsletter should be merely a small part of a more organized plan of advancement. To some extent, the Department may be able to ameliorate budgetary constraints by more aggressive fundraising and

outreach efforts, along with revenue-generating programs. New certificate programs, perhaps in professional writing, creative writing (with an emphasis on memoir, or writing in relation to narrative medicine, wellness, or aging), or continuing education offerings for working K-12 educators (potentially online) all might be parlayed into a far more robust outreach program and the development of donors. A certificate course that serves as a workshop for exam preparation for the Florida Teacher Certification Exam in English (FTCE) might be of interest to students. The development of Community Workshop course clusters or more sustained work with the Lifelong Learning Institute might further strengthen an already robust program and prompt a sense of synthesis in the curriculum.

Pedagogical equipment and resources:

- While in most ways the department has found positive ways to respond to metrics, the pressure to reduce course costs and use open-source texts and educational materials has clearly created pedagogical friction and diminished student's ability to navigate and learn from annotated texts, high quality translations, and superior editions of notable primary texts. Faculty and students at all levels raised concerns about how the quality of education in the English Department was impacted by this decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations that need additional funding:

- *Raising graduate student stipends.* As noted above, stipends and teaching loads for graduate students are wildly inconsistent with best practices or even averages statewide or nationwide. Both factors negatively affect the department's ability to recruit well-qualified students, to encourage timely completion of degrees, and to place students in well-compensated positions when they graduate. The university administration should do everything possible to raise stipends to the level of a living wage, while freeing students from teaching responsibilities at critical phases of their careers. If, for example, the overall TA teaching load cannot be reduced from the present 2/2, the university should consider instituting a policy of offering course releases, or semesters wholly free of teaching, for all admitted students at critical phases of the degree process. We suggest, at minimum, a first-semester TA course release (so as to grow in competency as a teacher, increasing the quality of undergraduate education in the process), and a course release in the second year to produce MA and MFA thesis work.
- *Equity issues.* Non-tenure eligible faculty need an increase in compensation relative to living costs. Salary compression for associate professors needs to be addressed to avoid further attrition.

- *Hiring priorities.* The department may wish to consider areas in which “cluster hiring” (the recruitment of more than one specialist in an identified subfield) would be desirable and cost-effective. Growing public-facing programs such as the Peace and Justice curriculum, or creating wellness (medical humanities) or environmental studies programs are suggested options. While it may not map as neatly onto the Pillars approach, the departmental strength in Science Fiction and Fantasy also adds an opportunity for growth, potentially in the creative writing program as well as the literature/cultural studies side. Other strategies might include the hiring of advanced Assistant or early-career Associate Professors, who could arrive on campus ready to direct thesis work without compromising their own research profiles. The Review Committee is of the opinion that the department’s hiring priorities should prioritize an additional MFA faculty member (students drew our attention to critical shortages in course offerings in fiction; though actual enrollments may tell a different story), since Creative Writing is an area of considerable graduate student interest, and the program has the potential to grow and increase graduate degrees awarded by the department. Otherwise, if the program continues to grow, the faculty-student ratio will become untenable and will further affect the reputation and quality of this department. However, we also caution against growing an imbalance between the MA and MFA programs.

- *Enhanced advising.* It may be the case that the quality of undergraduate education is being compromised by issues of advising that require additional funding. We repeatedly heard concerns about the availability of advising: teaching assistants expressed concern about the lack of a support structure for students (perhaps non-majors) failing or struggling with composition, and we also heard the campus shift to a centralized advising system characterized as “ruining” this crucial component of undergraduate education. An assessment therefore should be conducted of both the advising system for undergraduate majors and the support structure—writing center, tutorial assistance—for freshmen who are in danger of failing required composition courses. Additional personnel--potentially in the form of professional advising or instructors with course buyouts for advising time--may be required to remedy these two important matters.
 - Increased involvement in faculty mentoring structures may be warranted. Faculty mentoring of undergraduates seems to be in place formally, but largely neglected by students and faculty alike. Both external reviewers expressed surprise that semesterly meetings with advisors or mentors are not incentivized or even required. Should resources or administrative will be unavailable to address professional advising in the department, we suggest creative problem solving around improving faculty mentoring of undergraduates, perhaps devoting time and resources for cohort mentoring over coffee or lunch, etc. Another

recommendation is "Paired Up Centralized Advising." This would entail first-generation mentoring in the division of student affairs and private mentoring programs in the department.

- *Updating department webpage.* The department webpage is in need of updating. This is an important recruitment tool, particularly for potential graduate students. We recommend including student-focused content: profiles of graduates, alumni information, pictures of dynamic class sessions, and more information about what students and graduates can do with the degree. The current pages are too text-heavy for contemporary viewers. Additionally, while the Facebook and Twitter accounts are well developed, Instagram may be worth exploring.

Recommendations that could be addressed without additional funding:

- *Drafting of multi-year strategic plan.* The Department should consider drafting a multi-year Strategic Plan. This plan should encompass program development and hiring priorities, as well as strategies for recruitment and retention of a diverse faculty. Given the reality that the project of increasing faculty size will be a gradual process, this plan should identify areas in which the department can reasonably expect to achieve research prominence, as well as other subfields in which less coverage will be possible.
- *Revision of departmental mission statement.* In addition, we noticed that the department's mission statement, drafted in response to last review (Caminero-Santangelo, 2012), was vague and not student- and outreach-directed. It does not, for example, include the words "reading," "literature," or "interpretation"; indeed, it was difficult to understand how this mission statement might not be for the College as a whole. We did not see, for example, how the student who was delighted by *The Book of Margery Kempe* or who loved the poetry of Derek Walcott might find those affective attachments represented in this mission statement. To reflect the department's commitments to initiatives such as the Peace and Justice Program, and to mirror its real strengths, we recommend the inclusion of words such as "justice," "citizenship," "inclusion," alongside more the more market-centric language currently contained there. We also urge the department to consider drafting a diversity statement that reflects the values expressed in their curriculum, recruitment, and hiring practices. We recommend that they work together with the FAU Center for IDEAs (Inclusion, Diversity Education, and Advocacy) to write the diversity and mission statements.
- *Major recruitment and enrollment strategies.* Several strategies have already been mentioned to improve the recruitment of majors, even though we note that humanities enrollment is a nationwide problem, and FAU seems to be doing better than most

programs in retaining majors. In addition to new approaches to undergraduate mentoring, a revised website, and a refocused mission statement (all detailed above), we recommend expanding the prominence and availability of project-based, experiential, and archive-based courses at the graduate and undergraduate level. These may come in the form of enhanced undergraduate research, expanded internship opportunities, short-term study abroad programs, and community-engaged learning. Existing efforts in the department are inspiring; we recommend expanding the number and scope, especially as they may connect more directly to pillars-and-platforms initiatives such as Peace and Justice, Healthy Aging, South Florida Culture, Diversity, and environmental concerns.

- *Enhancement of IFP/general education courses.* While double majoring appears to be difficult in the current metrics climate, IFP literature courses offer important funnels for recruitment, and an attention to these courses has shown some positive benefit in nationwide instances. Current genre-based formats make logical sense in terms of course coherence, but offer little “storefront appeal” for non-majors seeking an engaging point of entry. Each external reviewer has seen some success in initiatives in their home departments that address these issues:
 - University of Arkansas teaches larger sections of “Introduction to Literature” run by excellent tenured and tenure-track faculty and supported by GTAs. Putting experienced faculty in charge of these sections and using multimodal learning and writing strategies has repositioned these courses as recruiting opportunities and, over time, has increased enrollment in other English classes.
 - West Virginia University is phasing out similar genre-based courses for thematic courses with interdisciplinary appeal (e.g. Literature and the Human Body; Literature of Science and Nature; Literature of Love, Sex, and Gender) which appeal to students across the curriculum who may find issues of culture more engaging than issues of form. Talented students in these courses, as identified by course instructors, are sent a personalized email from the chair acknowledging their success and inviting them to consider a minor or a second major.

Both of these approaches depend on significant participation from established faculty with deep content knowledge, an approach recently highlighted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.² While these sections may not be first-choice options for established faculty, a more systematic rotation of these courses alongside rotations (for example) at the Davie campus and for graduate teaching may help create energy for pedagogical innovation and exchange of ideas at all levels.

² <https://www.chronicle.com/article/We-Reversed-Our-Declining/243009>

- *Improved retention of tenure-stream faculty.* The recent loss of established faculty and concomitant influx of new faculty in the department provides an opportunity to rethink the onboarding of new faculty and curriculum. The Department should devise and implement formal mentoring guidelines--better codified than current practice, which has uneven expressions--for probationary faculty. The goals of such mentoring must include protecting junior faculty from excessive service and—especially—excessive advising and directing duties before tenure. A departmental mentoring policy is something apart from the standardized university guidelines: it should be readily available, consistently observed, and offer affirmative examples of practices and attitudes that embody ethical mentorship.³ Best practices for ethical mentoring involve paying particular attention to the well-being of, and challenges confronted by, emerging scholars of color, scholars with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ scholars, female scholars, first-generation scholars, and scholars who are undocumented.

We noted that the large cohort of newly hired faculty provided support to one another, which mitigated the process of acculturation to *this place*. This effect provides support for identifying entrenched norms that might usefully change, but also slows the processes of understanding more nuanced contexts. We strongly recommend departmental opportunities to *listen* across divides, to enhance ways that junior faculty can learn norms and ways tenured faculty can grow from change. We noted that tenured faculty seemed not to have perceived the seriousness of new faculty concerns; new faculty similarly seem not to have heard or seen the kinds of invisible labor that tenured faculty invested in the department. Significant issues of miscommunicated or under-communicated norms that we heard include:

- A need to make the full range of campus resources known, including support for teaching, reporting/support systems; title IX PHP (“victim services”), departmental procedures, etc.;
- Openness and clarification around current best practices for hiring, including assessment of candidates from diverse backgrounds and protecting first-year faculty from hiring committees;

³ As the Society of Early Americanists’ (SEA) recent statement, “The Ethical Mentoring of Junior Scholars in the Humanities,” notes (<https://www.societyofearlyamericanists.org/about-us/archive/ethical-mentoring-draft-sea-2018>), institutional efforts to codify healthy and respectful relationships tend to emphasize what *not* to do, and recommends instead that efforts focus on best practices of what *to* do. We also recommend the review of the University of Michigan, Rackham Graduate School’s “How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Guide for Faculty” (<https://www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/Fmentoring.pdf>).

- Clarity around written and unwritten tenure and third-year-review expectations (especially around new scholarly forms and media, as well as collaborative writing), and a clear, written policy around internal and external fellowships and residencies;
- The collegial sense of humor that several senior faculty noted as a departmental strength could be and was registered as insularity, clubbiness, and in some specific instances as microaggression;
- Expectations placed on untenured faculty to lift certain loads (Davie teaching, new preps, invisible cultural labor) was put in tension with similar statements from established faculty about invisible service, time put in on developing resources now taken for granted, etc.

We urge departmental leadership to not underestimate the ongoing acculturation process, but we also recognize that tenured faculty may need to do some acculturation to a diverse and intellectually dynamic sea-change in the composition of the department. Most importantly, we urge empathetic and opening *listening* practices and less-charged venues than faculty meetings in which to facilitate them.

- *Regularization of course offerings.* Graduate course offerings need to be regularized to ensure access and degree completion, but they should also be flexible enough to account for bottlenecks. MFA craft/workshop courses are of particular concern. Stricter vetting and scheduling of proposed graduate seminars, along with longer-term course planning by the Director, may be necessary to ensure reasonable coverage, efficient use of time and personnel, and consistent standards for content and workload. This may accompany some bigger-picture discussion of programmatic goals and mission (as above) to imagine changes to existing rotations that may reflect new disciplinary directions.

CONCLUSION

At present, the English department achieves a great deal and employs a talented, dedicated group of faculty—both tenure track and non-tenure eligible instructors—and academic professionals. A significant number of graduate and undergraduate students the committee met expressed great admiration of the faculty and a high degree of satisfaction with most aspects of their academic programs. The department is producing good creative and scholarly output and performing at levels consistent with its peers and some of its aspirational peers.

At the same time, many of the issues outlined above prevent this department from being as successful as it might be, and must be met with a concerted departmental effort to revise and improve some of the areas mentioned here: quality of life for graduate students; cultural issues attending retention of untenured faculty; bilateral openness to change across all faculty

constituencies; updated approaches to undergraduate populations that emphasize appealing elements already in place and available for growth across the department; and an assessment of the tension between canonical literatures and an ever-expanding sense of the diversity of the literary.

Special thanks to:

- The faculty members and students who provided the review team with a myriad of relevant comments and observations about the major and department.
- Chair Eric Berlatsky for a comprehensive and transparent self-study document aligned to FAU's strategic actions and initiatives and for helping with additional document requests throughout the process.