

BACKGROUND

On April 11 and 12, 2010, I visited the campus of Central Washington, University in Ellensburg, WA as an outside evaluator participating in the English Department's Program Review. I interviewed faculty, students, and administrators, and met individually with the English Department Chair, the English Education Coordinator, and others. This report is my evaluation of the strengths and challenges of the English Department based on these interviews over this two-day period, careful reading of the Departmental self-study, examination of the CWU web page and catalogue, appraisal of the student literary magazine, *Manastash*, and attendance at the reading of a visiting writer.

I used the Association of Departments of English (ADE) Bulletin, Number 132, Fall, 2002, as a guide for both my interviews, and the preparation of this report. The ADE publication includes guidelines for external reviews as well as standards for class size, assessment, professional ethics, scholarship, as well as issues surrounding staffing hiring, adjunct faculty, and other professional issues. My subsequent comments are, without doubt, influenced by the generosity of time and kindness extended to me by CWU staff, students, faculty, and administrators during every step of the process.

OVERALL IMPRESSION

The English Department Self-Study document presented an imposing first impression of the department that was reinforced by my visit. Well-written and thorough, the document carefully detailed how the department was responding to the often challenging requirements of tying student learning outcomes to curriculum and instructional practices, of developing assessment procedures to determine student success at graduation, and to considering the skills students need to enter the work force. In fact, the English Department at Central Washington University is a highly productive, if not exemplary, department within a mid-sized, rural, public university. In spite of current resource restrictions brought on by the financial crisis at both federal and state levels with the potential to undermine CWU's central mission of

providing post-secondary educational access to both local students and urban students in the State of Washington, I found students, staff, faculty, and administrators to be working as a team, supporting each other, maintaining a positive morale, and succeeding at maintaining CWU as a vital, growing campus.

STRENGTHS

Faculty: Both individually and as a group, the English Department faculty is exceptionally active and productive in the areas of service and scholarship. They are a diverse faculty both in areas of expertise, and also culture and background. Collectively, they are members of every national, regional, and state professional organization in the field, from the Modern Language Association, National Council Teachers of English, National Writing Project, to the Popular Culture Association, American Shakespeare Society, and others. Their publication lists are extensive and reflect the publishing records, both in terms of quantity and quality of peer reviewed journals, of English faculty at larger, Tier I institutions. The creative writers in the department have earned awards and recognition well beyond the local level, and their work and public readings are national in scope. Faculty success in attracting grants and research money is well beyond what is expected of an English department nation-wide. They are on review boards at state and national levels, present at conferences at all levels, facilitate workshops for peers and other professionals, and generously serve the local community. They take their responsibilities for departmental governance seriously.

Students shared glowing reports of their teachers as both instructors and mentors. During my visits with faculty, and after meeting with groups of students, I came away with deep regard and respect for the dedication and hard work the English Department faculty devote to the institution, the students, and the profession.

Students: I met with two groups of undergraduates, two groups of graduate students, and mingled with students at a reading and a reception with a visiting writer

during my visit. All in all, students are very satisfied with the education they are receiving at Central Washington.

Two graduate students reported they chose CWU over larger and more 'prestigious' campuses they described as "impersonal" and "overly stressful." One student left a graduate program to attend CWU so that he/she could gain teaching experience in the freshman composition program which was not an option at his/her previous institution. The opportunity to teach composition was mentioned frequently as both a unique professional opportunity as well as a means for students to financially afford to attend CWU.

Graduate students agreed that they were appropriately academically challenged, but not overwhelmed by the coursework. They expressed an interest in some independent study options to pursue particular interests with knowledgeable faculty.

As a group, students remarked that, by and large, faculty were accessible, and were generous with their time and advice. Students in all of the pathways within the graduate and undergraduate programs spoke of the respect they had for their instructors' extensive knowledge, and they all expressed confidence they would graduate as competitive applicants for teaching positions, further education, and in the job market.

Students in the writing major appreciated taking courses in related departments, for example, journalism and theater arts. Students across majors appreciated class sizes, and loved writing classes that took a workshop approach. Students also valued opportunities to act as peer tutors in the writing lab.

During our meetings, students were articulate, honest, and optimistic about their futures. They expressed pride in CWU, and indicated they were students there by choice not convenience. Several were from out of State; however, during my visit I saw few students of color among the student body.

Staff: Although I did not meet formally with staff members, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with several staff members as they helped with my arrangements both prior to and upon arriving on campus, escorted me from one location to the next, and arranged for my meetings during the time I was there. Every person with whom I worked was competent, friendly, efficient, generous, and proud of the institution. In addition, I took an occasional 'break' in the English Department office, and saw first hand the engaging and well-informed way the staff helped students and faculty alike. As everyone working as part of an institution can attest, the attitudes, competence, and cooperation of staff is crucial to the success of the entire endeavor. Although I was only on campus briefly, I can say with confidence that the staff and faculty of the English Department work as a team, and mutually respect each other's contributions.

Administration: The English Department benefits from a supportive University, College, and Departmental administration. I came away from a meeting with Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies, Dr. Tracy Pellett, and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, Dr. Wayne Fouts, assured that the administration has the best interests of the faculty and students at the core of their decision-making while recognizing that the current state of higher education financing is at a low point across the nation. Nonetheless, the University administration expressed an intention to listen to faculty needs and concerns when making tough decisions, and asked important questions about curricular and instructional procedures that combined efficiency with best practices.

The Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, Dr. Marji Morgan expressed confidence in the English Department, and recognizes the importance of supporting the arts as evidenced through her enthusiasm for the Visiting Writers Series. Not only does she provide financial support for this endeavor, but also, she participates as an attendee and host of a reception for faculty and students with the guest presenter at her home. At the event I was fortunate to attend, the Dean also involved

the local community by inviting them to participate both as benefactors of refreshments for the reception, and also as attendees. Maintaining a positive rapport between the University and the local community is particularly important in rural areas, and in times of financial cut-backs to preserve an optimistic morale and reciprocal 'town and gown' relationship.

Everyone from the students, staff, faculty, and other administrators sang the praises of the Chair of the English Department. Not only is he recognized as hard working, but also as fair and thoughtful. In addition to his work as an administrator, he has maintained his role as a productive faculty member, currently preparing a book length manuscript for publication.

The structure of leadership seems to be working for the department with faculty members assuming decision-making roles and sharing governance among the members of the department. However, as is often the case, some faculty seem to be taking on more ancillary duties than others.

Curriculum: Both the undergraduate and graduate majors in English reflect national trends and theoretical constructs. Gradually, contemporary English programs are shifting from a chronological/genre /author-based curriculum to a cultural studies approach. That is, instead of offering a course on poetry, a period of literature, or one on, for example, Chaucer, current English Departments are structuring their majors on themes, topics, theories, or socio/political contexts.

This shift is recognized and is taking place in the English Department at CWU. As new faculty are hired over time, the graduate programs they come from will influence their approaches to the major. It is healthy that the program at Central Washington has room for both a traditional approach to the field while welcoming change. This balance is necessary to honor the importance of the work of all faculty members, as well as to meet the expectations of students who come from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds. The focus on diversity in American academia is modeled in

English departments such as at CWU through course offerings reflecting multiple approaches to the study of English, non-canonical literature, multi-media artifacts, and the uses of technology for teaching and learning.

In addition, the opportunity for students to narrow their focus on literature, writing, or teaching English/language arts at both the graduate and undergraduate level, is a current trend among English departments across the country. Historically, the label *English major* meant the student read a particular canon of established works, and limited his/her writing to analysis of the assigned texts, often relying on outside sources to interpret and analyze these selections. At Central Washington, similar to campuses around the country, writing is becoming as highly desired a concentration as literature. This trend is partly due to new job and professional possibilities; rather than diminishing writing as a needed skill, the rise in technology has created a multitude of opportunities for workers with highly developed writing competencies. Creative writing, technical writing, and creative-non-fiction writing are all highly prized by prospective employers.

Moreover, teaching English in grades 6 through 12 continues to be a career choice for many students, often students who are planning to return to their home communities and/or who are first generation college students. CWU clearly recognizes these trends, and has adapted its curriculum to the needs of today's students and graduates.

Furthermore, the creation of the Writing Lab under the auspices of the English Department is a boon to both students needing additional help with their language skills, and also to students who can gain teaching experience that will apply to their future careers. The lab also serves as a link between the English major and general education courses in composition, and forges a relationship between theory and practice in the field. In addition, a thriving site of the National Writing Project connects the K-12 community of educators with CWU, and serves both pre-service as well as experienced teachers.

In summary, the English Department at Central Washington University has many strengths. Despite a stagnant economy, the faculty, staff, and administrators comprise a hard-working team with students and best teaching practices at the center further evidenced by the scholarship of teaching as a recognized area for tenure and promotion.

CONCERNS

Faculty: Faculty in the English department are working especially hard, and some expressed a frustration at balancing scholarly productivity with service and teaching. This balance is particularly difficult to achieve at a primarily 'teaching institution' like CWU which carries a comparatively high teaching load. Although the English Department has developed some creative ways to provide research time for faculty, it is incumbent on the larger institution to assure faculty that tenure and promotion, and other forms of recognition are granted equitably, and with an understanding of the importance and demands of effective teaching. Faculty working as hard and producing as much scholarship as the curriculum vitae of CWU English department reflect risk suffering from burn-out early in their careers. The University and College, along with the Department might want to consider creative ways of continuing to support faculty by rewarding them with the best commodity—time.

Moreover, each faculty member has individual strengths and weaknesses. Faculty succeed best when putting their energies into the pursuits they find most rewarding and defer to others tasks less interesting. For example, I will discuss advising later in this report with some recommendations for assigning advising to those faculty who prefer this kind of interaction with students and assigning other responsibilities to those who don't. This approach also addresses the problem of burnout.

Faculty expressed some concern that reform efforts, particularly general education experiments, are abandoned before they have a chance to really work. They articulated a need for more support for faculty development, time to collaborate on

general education reform, resources to establish exchange programs--both domestic and international, and strategies for graduate student recruitment.

Overall, my meetings with faculty were positive and informational, rather than critical. Faculty were interested in Issues of equitable workload and compensation for extra responsibilities which are always a concern.

Students: By and large, as I stated above, students were very satisfied with their experiences at CWU. However, as would be expected, both of the groups of undergraduates I interviewed expressed anxieties and concerns.

First, most were worried about time to graduation and, what they perceived as the irregularity and infrequency of required courses caused by the current fiscal situation. They felt as though changes were made so quickly they didn't have a chance to adjust their thinking or schedules. Several suggested that improved advising procedures could address this problem, and stated that their advisors were not easily accessible either in person or on line, and that the advising materials both on paper and on line were not up-to-date.

Writing major students wanted more options for business and technical writing either in the English Department or through professional programs on campus. They, as well as students in the other two tracks, surprisingly, expressed a need and a desire for more instruction in traditional grammar. They felt their editing and revision skills were hampered by a lack of grammatical knowledge.

Students studying to become secondary teachers were challenged by the need to complete both the English major and the credential requirements in four years with most admitting they would be taking at least five or even six years to complete all the requirements. On the other hand, they stated a preference for the current combined degree program rather than the model used in many states, including California, requiring a four-year undergraduate degree followed by a one-year credential

program. These students also were struggling with what they described as a lack of coordination between the English Department and the Education Department. They were particularly disappointed in the courses they had to take in education as they stated these courses were more directed to elementary level teachers rather than secondary. They wished more of their methods courses could be in the English Department. They also wanted more time to spend in public school classrooms, and increased opportunities to “think like a teacher not a student.”

A handful of students in each group complained that certain faculty were “too hard,” or didn’t make expectations clear or achievable. In my experience, this complaint is often a reflection on the student rather than the teacher. In fact, after asking these students questions, I learned that they were transfer students from community colleges who were having a difficult time making the transition. On the other hand, both faculty and students were concerned that the introductory courses to the major sometimes discouraged students who then changed to a different major, rather than serving their purposes as initiating students to the ‘habits of mind’ that characterize an English major.

At least two students in each group of undergraduates expressed dissatisfaction with classroom facilities; I did sympathize with one student who was having a hard time squeezing his legs under the desk, and students pointed out two chairs with serious cracks in the seats. Although this seems like a petty issue, students are affected by the facilities they have available.

Significantly, some students argued that faculty are not using technology effectively for both teaching and communication. As can be the case with the young, they were impatient for their professors to become as technologically comfortable with computers as teaching and learning tools as they are. Widespread grumbling about the current software program used for instructional and informational purposes at CWU punctuated both meetings with undergraduates.

Graduate students shared undergraduate concerns about graduating on time. They articulated a continuing problem with two or more requirements offered in conflict with each other, and not offered often enough for them to complete their degrees; two students said they did not think they would be able to financially continue as students even with the opportunity to teach a section of composition since the course(s) they needed would not be offered until next spring.

Two of these students mentioned that the demands of writing a successful thesis or project was daunting to them, and more than one student was anxious about passing the written test. These concerns, while legitimate, may not require addressing directly as much as providing students with a mechanism for expressing their anxieties; students appreciate a willing ear to convey their fears, and allowing students regular opportunities to express themselves constructively through an anonymous questionnaire or similar process might act as an escape valve for some of their anxieties. The details of high standards and rigorous expectations are the purview of the faculty to establish regardless of student insecurity.

Administration: In my discussions with administrators, we weighed the pros and cons of the semester versus the quarter system both fiscally and educationally. I also queried both students and faculty about their preferences. Not surprisingly, undergraduate students preferred the quarter system because they could take a wider variety of classes over the course of a year, and had fewer courses to balance during a ten week versus fifteen week time period.

Some graduate students and faculty posited the same arguments. However, writing majors were more likely to consider positively a semester schedule because it would give them chances to write more well developed papers. Graduate students also expressed interest in the semester concept to allow them to delve deeper into a subject than is possible during a quarter.

Faculty discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the two systems in terms of learning student names, providing individual attention, going into greater depth, and/or covering a wider selection of reading materials, versus preparing multiple syllabi, averaging and posting grades, or teaching a variety of courses. Although my brief discussions bore no real data, overall, faculty and some graduate students liked the idea of switching to a semester system, but most undergraduates were opposed. As the administration shared with me, the decision to switch to semesters would, most likely, be a system-wide one, and would bear a cost, even if temporary, both financially and psychically to the students and work force at the University.

One final observation concerning administrative policies—on most campuses, the job of department Chair is a difficult one. Typically, Chairs have enormous responsibility with minimal authority. They are neither administrator nor faculty member while acting as both. Few campuses throughout the country have figured out how to address this conundrum. Most academic departments prefer a Chair who has come from the faculty whether from the home institution or outside, and a Chair who is both from the faculty and will return to the faculty after a term of office is the norm. CWU, like similar institutions, elects a Chair providing little or no professional development training to handle personnel issues, legal and administrative regulations, and budgetary management. The current Chair of the English department is doing an exemplary job, by all accounts. However, he has the additional burden of applying for promotion based on faculty criteria while at the same time working at full capacity as an administrator. This is a difficult position for the best of academicians.

Curriculum: I have commented on aspects of the curriculum above:

- Quarter versus semester systems
- Four year versus five-year undergraduate degree and credential
- Multiple concentrations within the major—writing, literature, teaching
- Traditional approaches versus contemporary interpretations of the field
- Integrating technology as a teaching, learning, and communicating tool

The remaining area of curriculum I would like to address is the composition program. Like many campuses across the country, lecturers and graduate students largely staff the composition program at CWU. The implications of this arrangement tangle the boundaries of curriculum, instruction, theory and practice, stability and status of the program, and the allocation of resources. The tensions operating among these categories have the potential to strengthen or divide an English department. As resources shrink and English departments evolve, it is important for any institution to decide the role the composition program will play in the university, and in relation to the English department.

At some universities, the composition program operates independently of the English department, and is overseen by an undergraduate dean. At other universities, the composition program is under the umbrella of the English department, and the coordinator of the program is a tenured faculty member who collaborates directly with the Chair. Some programs are headed by a non-teaching or non-tenure track coordinator, and other schools situate the composition program within a separate 'rhetoric and composition' department.

Other questions surrounding the position of the composition program include:

- the role of the Writing Center within the department and composition program, as opposed to an affiliation with a Learning Center run by Student Services
- the participation of the department and program in remediation.
- the responsibility of the department and program for delivering Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines
- the providing of ESL to students who are non-native English speakers

At Central Washington, I detected ambivalence about the relationship of the composition program to the department as a whole. This ambivalence will need to be addressed to assure that students and faculty are able to devote their energy toward meeting the goals, objectives, and learning outcomes of the composition program, rather than spending energy deciding 'where they fit.' Because the composition

program relies heavily on lecturers, measures need to be put in place to assure continuity of the program, and offer a measure of job security to lecturers. In the section below, I will provide some options to consider.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The two areas that I would like to discuss in this section are advising and the composition program. In both cases, adjustments have the capacity for addressing multiple issues, and can improve student satisfaction, faculty relationships, and administrative concerns.

Advising: Students and faculty alike expressed dissatisfaction with advising in the English Department. Some faculty felt overwhelmed by advising demands, and many students felt under-served.

Currently, I am familiar with three models for student advising at the undergraduate level. One is the system currently used at CWU. Students are assigned an advisor depending on the student's major: literature, writing, or English teaching. The advantages to this model are straight-forward; students have the opportunity to work with the faculty member most knowledgeable about the academic and career expectations of that major. However, this can lead to difficulties at the undergraduate level where often students are still evolving as scholars. Sometimes, the student and advisor simply don't get along, and the student feels trapped, and the advisor frustrated; sometimes the student decides to change into another major within the English Department and then has to 'start over' with a new advisor, on occasion requiring help from both advisors during the transition. Often advising loads are uneven with one faculty advisor having too many students to meet with all of them regularly while a colleague has far fewer, and then advisors are evaluated by students as unavailable or supportive regardless of the advisor's load. This model treats advising as an 'add on' and both students and advisors can feel put upon.

The second arrangement is rarely instituted in times of financial difficulty since it is the most expensive. Instead of distributing advising among faculty, usually without release time, a faculty member is given a substantial course release to advise all of the undergraduate students in the department regardless of their focus; at some campuses, advising is a full time assignment depending on the number of majors, and is rotated for a certain time period among faculty, similar to the Chair's job, the graduate coordinator's, or the composition director's position. A small number of campuses hire a full time advisor with lecturer status who possesses an understanding of the different majors within the discipline as well as student services skills.

The advantages to this model are that students have an opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship with the advisor, and to work with someone who is very well versed in the regulations and requirements of whatever degree program the student chooses. Students who change focus can continue to work with the same person, and if they have made mutual agreements about the students' program of work, these agreements can be honored without additional approval. This model elevates the importance of advising as an institutional obligation to students, and as a retention tool.

The main drawback to this arrangement is cost. Furthermore, faculty not advising lose out on the benefits of working with students on a one-to-one basis in a non-classroom setting.

The third model is a hybrid of the first two. Each academic year, a different faculty member agrees to be the advisor for all new and transfer students, regardless of their specialization, and works with that cadre of students until they graduate. Rather than receiving release time, the advisor is given credit for ancillary duties and is relieved, for instance, from committee work the year he/she is initially assigned the group of students when the workload is the greatest. After that faculty member's students have graduated, then he/she is eligible to be put back in the advisor pool.

Advantages to this model are similar to the ones above with the additional benefit that a student can change advisors, under extenuating circumstances, and still remain in the same program. In addition, faculty not suited to advising can choose other roles within the department where their abilities are put to better use. Campuses adopting or adapting this model have reported greater student satisfaction with advising, greater faculty satisfaction, more flexibility in assigning ancillary duties at the department level, and more efficiency in providing students access to advisors and current advising materials.

Advisors can individualize their process to meet their preferences and student needs. For example, some advisors begin each semester with a large group meeting of all advisees followed up by individual conferences with only those students needing additional help. Other advisors have an initial 'virtual' meeting on-line with advisees before meeting with them individually. Other advisors have separate group meetings with students in each sub-major of English. Some advisors use all three approaches.

Although I have no hard data that this model of advising improves student retention, I have anecdotal evidence that students report greater satisfaction that their academic needs are being met. And advisors report developing satisfying mentoring relationships with students, including those they may not have met in classes because of their career path.

The Composition Program: The main recommendation I have for addressing the composition program and related questions is for the English Department to help establish the program's identity. That is, the program needs to be fully integrated into, if not the English Department, a viable segment of the University—undergraduate affairs, general education basic skills, etc.

Some campuses across the U.S. have accomplished integrating the composition program more fully into the English department by instituting portfolio assessment for

all freshmen composition students; faculty all participate in developing the assessment rubric or passing criteria, and also participate in the norming and evaluating of portfolios. Portfolio assessment has the potential for improving the conversation about literacy within a department regardless of the faculty member's specialty.

The Department also needs to address the advantages and disadvantages of a composition program peopled largely by non-tenure track faculty, as well as a significant number of graduate students. Again, departments using a portfolio system often find this situation is somewhat mitigated by regular participation by all faculty in the assessment piece of the system, either by rotating into the reading of portfolios on a regular basis, by attending norming sessions, or through helping to devise and revise student learning outcomes to be evaluated. Faculty need not teach courses in composition to productively contribute to the strength of the program.

In addition, regular professional development for faculty, whether tenure track or not, graduate student or long-time lecturer, that addresses a common concern or challenge, has the capacity to bring colleagues together. English department faculty could be the recipients or the providers. In the case of CWU, opportunities for improving faculty use of technology as a teaching tool could be included. WAC and TESL workshops for graduate students working in composition classes could be offered, and problems with assessment and student learning outcomes could be tackled. Deciding the topics for professional development can, itself, build collegiality and common purposes among discrepant segments of a department.

On-going professional development is particularly important for graduate students to experience before they go on to career positions. Moreover, graduate students at CWU are given the opportunity to teach in the composition program their very first semester before taking any coursework to prepare them. The two-day orientation they attend prior to taking over a class could be a starting point for continued, regular

professional development that would greatly benefit them as well as the entire department.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

For two days in mid-April, I visited the campus of Central Washington University as an outside reviewer for their Program Review. I wish to thank the many people who gave so generously of their time and hospitality. I will always feel a connection now with the timothy fields, mountains, and people of central Washington.

The English Department at Central Washington University is to be commended for its productivity, positive working environment, national, regional, and state participation of faculty in creative writing, secondary English education, and literary studies. The success of the English department is recognized and supported by the College and University administration. Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed satisfaction with their decisions to become English majors, and take pride in Central Washington University.

The English Department is of sufficient size not only to accomplish many goals, but also to inadvertently lose sight of common purposes as each faculty member becomes involved in his/her particular area of expertise. This report has suggested two areas in which the English department might make adjustments to ensure that administration, staff, and faculty are working toward a common vision for the students at CWU both in the composition program and/or as English majors.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan G. Bennett, PhD
Professor, Humboldt State University

Arcata, CA 95521

(707) 826-5936

sgb1@humboldt.edu