

AY20 Expedited Program Review – Optional Program Response to the Dean’s Findings: English BA and MA

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To: John Stalvey, Interim Provost

From: David Bowie, Professor and Chair of English, Anchorage Campus

Cc: John Petraitis, Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
English Program Review Committee Members:
Jackie Cason, Professor of English, Anchorage Campus
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Re: AY20 Expedited Program Review: Optional Program Response to Dean’s Recommendations

Program/s in this review: BA in English and MA English

Program response to dean’s findings:

1. SUMMARY

The Department of English has a record of being responsive, adaptive, and resilient in the face of instability and change. An adaptive disposition is intrinsic to the English Studies curriculum and is a quality we foster in students who will face a world in flux after graduation and who will emerge with a strong understanding of, appreciation for, and capacity to use the English language. The University of Alaska Anchorage’s Department of English has developed curriculum in accordance with its own that serves and amplifies UAA’s values and expectations for academic programs and its mission and vision of student success.

While cuts are absolutely necessary, they should be based on *transparent* financial evidence and a vision of the future; the Dean’s document suggests that the University’s vision is simply a drawdown of graduate degrees in the interest of resourcing undergraduate degrees. While this process of expedited program review examines one program at a time, a future of budget constraints calls upon us to think more broadly and to imagine programs that will attract students and invite them to attend our campus. Continual change without vision wastes resources and impedes efforts to fulfill program and University missions.

For these reasons, the Department is combining our response to the BA and MA program reviews, because any changes to the MA will directly impact our BA program.

Below, we lay out the context for our Department’s situation, our fiscal and logistical questions and concerns about the Dean’s recommendations, and our own set of recommendations in response to the Dean’s document.

2. CONTEXT FOR THE DISCUSSION

Any discussion of the future of the programs offered by the Department of English must acknowledge the changes that have occurred in the past several years, because the Department has

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repeatedly found itself in the position of responding to mandates, and attempting to do so in proactive and purposeful ways that would support student learning and achieve fiscal efficiencies. However, efficiencies have not been fully realized, because following each revision to the curriculum, interim administrative leaders have shifted course in ways that have adversely affected the Department.

Before 2018, the Department of English offered a slate of courses similar to most English departments across the country, including the first-year composition general education courses and a number of more specific undergraduate and graduate courses. In 2014, the University of Alaska System administration cited course transfer issues as a barrier to student success, and mandated a review and alignment of all general education courses across the UA system. Internal research revealed that all courses were already transferring (except, of course, those with failing grades), but the Department seized the opportunity to address the transfer of learning challenge by building a coherent curriculum grounded in first-year composition courses that then reinforced core concepts in upper division courses. That programmatic revision—which included state-wide alignment, revisions to many of the courses our Department offers, building online master courses, and creating new training materials for graduate students, Middle College instructors, and part-time faculty—took three years and considerable work. However, shortly after the conclusion of all of these changes, in 2018 the first-year composition courses were removed from the Department without consultation and placed in a different college, despite the desire of the Department of English to retain them.

This administratively driven decision had a number of adverse effects. Most immediately, to mitigate damage to the MA program in English, changes to the design of that program were necessary. The first-year composition courses had, before their move, served a dual purpose: They had, of course, been used to educate beginning college students in the basics of writing, but they were also used to provide opportunities for high-achieving MA students to gain experience in the teaching and evaluation of writing by serving as teaching assistants in conjunction with coursework in the theory and practice of teaching. As teaching assistants, they provided a service to the University and, in return, were able to obtain an advanced degree at a lower cost. However, once the courses were moved, there was no longer an opportunity for MA students to obtain teaching assistantships or the experience that they gained in fulfilling them. Therefore, in 2018 we revamped the MA in English in a way that would allow students to gain a broad base of experiences in English Studies, and that would at the same time both reduce costs and leverage a stacked class model to incorporate the pedagogical and leadership experiences that those graduate students were now otherwise unable to receive.

Separately, we had realized that the curricular model for the BA in English, which followed a very traditional model for an English program, provided too many constraints for students and thus created bottlenecks that reduced students’ abilities to complete the program in a timely manner; in addition, it did not reliably expose students to the breadth of the field of English Studies represented in the Department (i.e., literature, linguistics, rhetoric, literacy, creative writing, and advanced writing). Therefore, in 2019 we restructured the program to make it easier for students to complete their degree. At a superficial level, the changes we made can look like a simplification of the program, but they actually provide a foundation that allows students a cross-cutting experience that challenges them to experience, interpret, and apply the English language across many forms and contexts. Further, by incorporating this breadth of design, we developed a program that is distinct from all other English programs in Alaska and most of them across the nation. In addition, this revision of the BA program was done with the previous revision of the MA program in mind, so

that undergraduate students would, through their classes, have the opportunity to develop mentor-mentee relationships with their more experienced and capable graduate-level peers.

The recommendations now to delete the graduate program, reduce faculty positions by three, and continue to review the undergraduate major will likely require yet another curriculum overhaul to adjust for the loss of expertise in key areas of an integrated English Studies program. This process of continual revision and rebranding is not only inefficient but harmful, resulting in, among other things, the loss of both undergraduate and graduate student opportunities, plus a diversion of faculty labor from teaching students to focus on yet another curricular revision.

3. INTEGRATED NATURE OF THE BA AND MA PROGRAMS

The interconnection between the BA and MA is acknowledged in the Dean’s recommendation for the MA program, which suggests that “[d]eleting the MA...will help with the long-term sustainability of BA program.” However, the Department does not agree with the recommendation that the Dean makes in the MA document: “With this deletion the number of full time faculty should eventually be reduced to by [sic] three positions.” Given the interconnectedness of the MA and the BA, a reduction in three faculty positions due to the MA deletion will unavoidably have an impact on the long-term sustainability of the BA program. A reduction in three faculty positions is a 30% reduction in Department faculty at the Anchorage campus. In our opinion, a reduction of 30% to our faculty positions will not in fact help with the sustainability of the BA program; rather, it has potential to do great harm to our English Studies model and the strength of the English program, which is one of the largest majors in the College of Arts and Sciences and an essential component of a humanities education.

4. SPECIFIC CONCERNS

4a. NEED FOR CLARITY IN FINANCIAL ASSUMPTIONS

The Dean’s recommendations for the Department raise specific questions about the financial context for these decisions. First, we have unanswered questions about the following statement: “With fewer students in the [MA] program, the tuition they pay only covered 50% of the cost of teaching the courses in 2019.” Given our use of stacked courses, we are uncertain how this result was arrived at. This is particularly the case given that, if anything, graduate enrollments in stacked courses serve to boost total numbers and generate a higher rate of tuition dollars, since students pay graduate tuition for their seats in those courses. (We return to this issue in the next section.)

We also seek clarity about the benchmarks for improvement if we are to undergo continued review. If “[t]he English Department as a whole does not serve enough students to meet its costs”, what goals or benchmarks should the Department strive for to meet to improve this metric? Simply reducing faculty will not impact the number of students the Department serves; in fact, it may significantly compromise our capacity to recruit new students.

4b. CONCERNS ABOUT THE DEAN’S RECOMMENDATIONS

We have a number of concerns about the Dean’s recommendations for Continued Review of the BA in English and Deletion of the MA in English. To begin with the BA in English, we note that programs of a similar size with comparable FTE production were listed for Continuation, so we do not entirely understand the rationale for English’s Continued Review status. This is particularly the case since it is not clear from the Dean’s recommendation what specific issues need to be addressed

in the BA program. According to guidelines on the Expedited Program Review status page, Continued Review status means that the administration will “review the program again within 2 years after *specific issues identified* in the review are addressed” (italics added for emphasis). The Dean’s BA recommendation lists no specific issues for the Department to address, only indicating that “if the Board of Regents approves deletion of the English MA, then the long-term sustainability of the BA is likely improved. This should be monitored and addressed in a future program review.” What does “likely improved” sustainability look like? What guidelines should the Department use to measure this moving forward? It is unclear how this “likely” improvement is to be measured or addressed in future program reviews.

There are also no guidelines provided regarding what “eventually” reducing three faculty positions would look like. The Department has several questions about these reductions: Who is currently being counted, and in what role(s), to determine the numbers of the Department, and on which year(s) are the data based? Over the past seven years, three tenured Department members have worked full time in administrative roles and taught occasional courses for the Department. How are Department costs calculated for the salary and benefits of administrative personnel? For example, for people with partial appointments in English, are they each being considered as a full or as a partial position? Also, what is the accounting for people who regularly teach a course or two each year outside of the Department? Is there a distinction made between tripartite (e.g., 65% teaching/20% research/15% university service) and bipartite (e.g., 85% teaching/15% university service) faculty in this analysis? Do the financial calculations take into account the faculty losses that have recently occurred in the Department? How does the proposed deletion of the MFA factor into these numbers—do the reductions to English faculty include the faculty for the MFA or not? As can be seen, the lack of real transparency in the numbers feeding into the financial calculations lead to serious difficulties in understanding how the Department is to bring costs and revenue in line with each other.

We also have concerns about the rationale for recommending deletion of the MA in English. For example, the claim was made in the Dean’s review that last year tuition paid for only 50% of the cost of that program. However, we are uncertain how such a claim is possible, given that many of our graduate courses are stacked with undergraduate ones, meaning there is minimal extra cost for providing those courses. (If that statistic was based on, say, only standalone graduate courses then it would certainly make sense that that percentage is so low, but that would be a misleading result.) In addition, we are unclear whether this calculation includes sections of courses such as ENGL A698 and A699, for which faculty receive no workload compensation but students do pay tuition.

Finally, if student success actually is, as is widely alleged, the ultimate goal of the recommended changes, we wish to emphasize that we have purposefully and carefully built BA and MA programs that interweave in meaningful ways. The elimination of the MA program would damage this relationship, which currently benefits both undergraduate and graduate students.

4c. LIKELY EFFECTS OF THE DEAN’S RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE BA PROGRAM

Many of the CAS programs recommended for deletion are at the graduate level. The Dean’s recommendations thus seem to be organized around maintaining strong baccalaureate-level programs, and the Dean’s claim that the English MA deletion will improve the sustainability of the BA program would also suggest this goal. However, we object to the idea that the elimination of the MA program, combined with a reduction of 30% of our faculty (with the reduction, presumably, following the guidelines of the CBA) will help improve the sustainability of our BA degree.

Accepting these recommendations would have a negative impact on the BA program, on the ability of faculty to engage in high-impact practices, and on our capacity to participate meaningfully in research and service. Given that UAA’s mission includes a commitment to teaching, research, engagement, and creative expression as a means to discover and disseminate knowledge, tenure-track faculty workloads need to include research, and our ability to conduct high-level research is improved by the existence of the graduate program. Our faculty’s research should rather be fostered, because it benefits and enriches student experience. For example, faculty members design courses that engage with the research that they conduct in a place-based content, allowing students the opportunity to study linguistics, rhetoric, and literature grounded in Alaska-specific concerns.

Reduction of faculty and diminished strength of the English program would also negatively affect community campus English faculty and courses. While community campus English courses operate financially separately from CAS, the student experience and student success connection could be hindered or interrupted by implementing the Dean’s recommendations. It would indicate a step backward in encouraging collaboration between UAA campuses. That step backward would encumber the Department’s goal of increasing program accessibility to rural service areas. The proposed reductions would diminish the Department’s ability to serve those service areas, a cycle that would continually prevent the Department from achieving its academic and pedagogical mission.

One additional factor for community campus students is that they need to know that the UAA program is healthy if they are going to invest in moving to Anchorage to continue their education, whether they plan on pursuing a degree in English or another field. The community campuses feed many students into the Anchorage campus, and so we need to take into account the perceptions that are likely with program deletion. To begin with, many students have already seen complications with the education program, and they will be that much less interested in attending classes in Anchorage if programs that are seen as central to a university’s mission are not offered. In addition, given what we saw with the deletion of many of the School of Education’s programs, if students begin hearing that the MA in English has been deleted, they are likely to think that the BA will also be deleted. Instead of Anchorage being community campus students’ top choice to continue their degree, community campus faculty fear that that the Anchorage campus’s prestige will continue to drop with the weakening of its English program.

5. OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

If UAA is committed to maintaining and supporting undergraduate baccalaureate degrees, a robust undergraduate English major is an essential part of any solid humanities program. Our position as the fourth-most popular major in CAS by number of declared majors indicates that students value what we offer and that we have built a strong reputation and appealing curriculum offerings. We urge the administration to reconsider the short-term reduction of three faculty positions, as it can be expected that changes at the graduate level, as well as the Department’s weight in senior faculty, will result in faculty losses by attrition in the short-term future in any event. Looking practically at our Department, we face up retirements in the next three to five years. If we also lose faculty to positions at other universities and have three lines eliminated, the BA will not be sustainable by any measure. In fact, these cuts could have the effect of shuttering the Department.

In order to sustain the undergraduate program, reductions in faculty lines, if they are to occur, should be gradual and responsive. Reductions in Department faculty could be brought about with dual appointments, buy-outs, or transfer of faculty to other departments. Reductions should consider community campus faculty and offerings as well as Anchorage faculty. An initiative to

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administer English curriculum across sites and reduce duplication would be a genuine cost-cutting measure. But if the University cuts the early- and mid-career base of the Department, which would occur if the CBA is followed, it will be impossible to sustain a healthy undergraduate major. A reduction following CBA guidelines would mean the loss of two literature positions and our sole remaining linguistics position. This leaves a Department that functions on an English Studies model greatly depleted, and less able to provide a rich and integrative experience for our students. In short, eliminating three tenure-track positions would—contra the Dean’s claim that the goal is strengthening the BA in English—undermine our ability to sustain our integrated English Studies curriculum, because it would adversely affect the Department’s coverage across the distinct areas of English Studies (literature, linguistics, writing, and rhetoric).

In addition, we recommend that the MA program be suspended rather than deleted. We recommend this because we expect that there will come a time when the University is rebuilding, and it will be much more efficient to revive the MA program at the local level at that time rather than needing to develop a completely new MA program to be approved at higher levels.