

**Fitchburg State University
English Studies Department
External Evaluation
Spring 2024**

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The external review was conducted following the Department of English Studies' completion of a self-study and a site visit by Dr. Austin on April 23, 2024.

Summary

The Department of English Studies at Fitchburg State University serves the entire student body through its freshman-level writing and speech courses, and it offers three concentrations within the English Studies major: literature, professional writing, and secondary education. It also offers three minors: literature, professional journalism, and professional writing. The faculty consists of 17 full-time and 3-5 part-time members.

The most significant challenge at present is the enrollment decline in English Studies majors, in the university, and in higher education nationally. The challenges created by declining enrollments affect every aspect of the department, from its curriculum to its committee priorities to its morale. The faculty in English Studies work incredibly hard despite these challenges and they are trying to mitigate their effects by recruiting more students and mentoring their current ones with care. Faculty continue to innovate and change their curriculum. Even when not explicitly discussed below, the recommendations in this report are all related to this changing landscape in higher education.

The April 2024 Self-Study provides a comprehensive report on the department's mission, design, curriculum, faculty, students, and external partnerships. The following sections on strengths, challenges, and recommendations analyze the current state of the English Studies' Department and specify priorities for the future.

Strengths

- 1. Contributions to Teaching General Education:** English Studies faculty contribute significantly to teaching students in all majors at the university. They see all students at least twice and generally three times in their classes because they teach English 1100, English 1200, Speech courses, Literary Inquiry and Analysis courses, and more. Their pedagogical and curricular expertise is a cornerstone of the education that all students at the university receive.
- 2. Student Support:** The Department of English Studies practices a culture of care for students. Students report that their professors are accessible and supportive. In particular, students note that faculty share professional opportunities with them

and readily help them with advising. Students appreciate the many opportunities to showcase their writing on campus. Students feel that the English Studies faculty go above and beyond expectations as teachers and mentors.

- 3. Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy:** Students majoring in English Studies report that their professors encourage equal power dynamics in the classroom and create environments in which everyone is free to talk. Students also find that the assigned texts represent diverse perspectives.
- 4. Class Sizes:** Writing courses are capped at 18 students, which is excellent. 2000-level literature courses are capped at 28, and 3000- and 4000-level literature courses are capped at 25. These class sizes align with best practices specified by The Association of the Departments of English and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the Dean has supported these course caps that help create the conditions for effective learning.
- 5. Cross-Campus and Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Faculty in English Studies have helped create two new degree programs: Digital Media Innovation and Creative Arts Enterprise. The faculty have also partnered with other departments on campus to create new minors. These examples of interdisciplinary work provide direct benefits to students, and future collaborations could leverage faculty expertise located in different departments (e.g. Latinx course offerings could be increased by having Latinx scholars across different disciplines design and teach these). While barriers exist for executing cross-department work like this, there are student-facing benefits to figuring out ways to create timely, socially just courses and programs that are responsive to student demand.
- 6. First-Year Writing AIF Grant Work:** The study of first-year writing courses is a significant and important undertaking for the department and the university. The findings will have implications for curriculum, support for students' diverse language practices, placement, course structure, and more. This work is difficult to organize without a faculty member in the role of Writing Program Administrator, and it is commendable that faculty in the department have done this. Doing a qualitative study of this depth and breadth is an important step in creating a sustainable, institutionally supported first-year writing program.
- 7. Library Resources:** The Library has purchased important resources that benefit English Studies' faculty and students, including MLA Full-Text. The English Resource Guide created by the Librarians is, by default, part of each English course Blackboard shell, which removes the labor of having faculty members add this individually. Having a Writing Program Administrator (see Recommendation section below) would facilitate easier outreach between the librarians and instructors teaching first-year writing courses.
- 8. Concentrations in the English Studies Major:** The existence of concentrations within the major is a strength of the curriculum. This model balances choice and flexibility for students while providing structure and a guided introduction to different aspects of English Studies broadly.
- 9. Community Partnerships, Capstone Course, and Internships:** Journalism students have been actively partnering with local newspapers and publications, and

they are gaining professional experience and simultaneously serving the community. The capstone as a dedicated, required tool for helping students move into professions is also beneficial. Since the last program review, more students have been placed into internships.

- 10. Faculty Scholarship and Research:** The English Studies faculty are productive scholars who, in the past five years, have published 11 books, 24 book chapters, nineteen journal articles, and given four invited lectures and more than 20 conference presentations.

Challenges

- 1. Declining Enrollment:** The number of English Studies majors declined from 111 in AY 2018-10 to 54 in AY 2022-23. This significant drop in students available to enroll in courses has led to reverberating challenges, including tough decisions on courses to run in various semester and creating faculty schedules.
- 2. Course Rotation and Scheduling:** Because of low enrollment in the English major, it is difficult to offer courses students need to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Faculty report that the Dean has been understanding and lenient in letting low-enrolled courses run, which is helpful. Students report that their advisors provide exemptions when required courses don't fit a student's schedule, which is also helpful.
- 3. Eliminated Prerequisites:** Also because of low enrollment in the English major, all prerequisites for English courses have been removed. The result is that students are at increasingly different levels of preparation when they enter classes and it is more difficult for faculty to teach. Faculty report a "flattening" effect in which different course levels (e.g., 2000-, 3000-, and 4000-level) are no longer distinguishable.
- 4. Faculty Teaching Opportunities:** Faculty primarily teach within specific concentrations in the department and some faculty feel this practice limits them because they have expertise in multiple areas. Addressing this could be part of Recommendation #4 below.
- 5. Effects of General Education Revision Process:** The recent general education revision was reportedly defined by contention between departments and increased territorialism among faculty. These lasting cultural effects, exacerbated by concerns about low enrollment, can be barriers to faculty collaboration across disciplines. Faculty expressed interest in team teaching and collaboration with other departments, but the path to productive collaboration is unclear in the shadow of the general education revision. Both faculty-led and institutional efforts to change the resulting climate may be beneficial.
- 6. Graduate Program Sustainability:** The funding model for all graduate programs at the university requires them to be self-sufficient because they are not state supported. While many proactive changes have been made in the past five years, including a move to online delivery and creating 7-week instead of 15-week courses, there are worries about the sustainability of the program, which is unique from

professional programs and serves local teachers and writers who feel a calling to further their skills and find a community.

Recommendations

- 1. Hire or Appoint a Writing Program Administrator:** Hire a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) who is a tenure-track faculty member or appoint a current faculty member with expertise in Rhetoric and Composition to serve in this role. The WPA should be given adequate release time, which I recommend as two course releases per semester, to revise curricula for English 1100 and 1200, train and offer professional development for instructors, conduct assessment, revise placement procedures, revive and chair the first-year writing committee, liaise with the Library on information literacy instruction in English 1100 and 1200, and more.
- 2. Hire a Writing Center Director:** Hire a Writing Center Director who is a tenure-track faculty member with expertise in Rhetoric and Composition. The Writing Center Director should be responsible for hiring and training peer tutors, establishing tutoring practices based in writing studies pedagogy, planning writing events on campus/across the curriculum (e.g. workshops, writing circles), and managing the administrative aspects of the Writing Center (e.g. scheduling and record keeping). The Writing Center Director should be given adequate release time, which I recommend as two course releases per semester.
- 3. Hire a Faculty Member in Speech and Journalism:** Hire a tenure-track faculty member with a specialization in Speech or a dual specialization of Speech and Journalism. Currently, there is only one faculty member teaching Speech courses, which are required in at least 8 other programs beyond English Studies. Student interest exists for more sections of the current Speech courses and new courses to be designed at higher levels and in collaboration with other departments.
- 4. Improve Department Culture and Communication:** Bring in an outside facilitator to help the faculty discuss entrenched issues and develop strategies for transparent, dialogic communication in which all faculty in the department are valued, regardless of rank or area of expertise. Some faculty express anxiety about sharing ideas, especially around future directions of the department, and feel they are not supported by their colleagues. Discussing these difficult issues with the help of someone outside the department can catalyze positive effects on all areas of the department's future.
- 5. Increase and Diversify Marketing Strategies:** Marketing the English major in multiple ways would help address enrollment challenges. Currently, there is no committee or individual faculty member in the Department of English Studies tasked with marketing or coordinating retention efforts; much of this labor falls to the Department Chair and should be shared by other members of the department through the committee structure and by the institution. Internal "major fairs" for students to learn about different majors and external, institution-led marketing to prospective students would amplify the offerings of the department.

6. **Discuss Revisions to the Core Curriculum and the Tracks:** This is a stated goal in the self-study, and any curricular revision should be responsive to both national trends in English Studies, student interest, and to enrollment challenges. For example, conversations about the how to organize the core curriculum and literature concentration should consider the role of periodization versus courses in cultural studies, global literatures, and writing studies. Recent revisions to the Professional Writing and Teaching Licensure concentrations have been undertaken, so the priority for curricular revision is the core curriculum and the Literature concentration.
7. **Plan Assessments of the Concentrations:** This is a stated goal in the self-study and planned for Spring 2025. The department does not yet have concentration-specific assessment practices or rubrics and plans to develop these.
8. **Increase MTEL Support for Licensure Students:** Faculty report that students struggle with MTEL tests. Even though student pass rate is excellent at 97%, more support for students as they are preparing could make the process easier. Recommended ways to support students in their test preparation include having the institution pay for MTEL preparation and creating a testing center on campus.
9. **Consider a New Funding Model for the Graduate Program:** Begin conversations with administrators about restructuring graduate program funding across campus. Some graduate programs generate significant revenue that could be distributed to support other graduate programs like the English Studies MA and Professional Writing Certificate; creative thinking and collaboration is likely needed to support programs like those in English Studies that add value but are smaller in scale.
10. **Provide Non-remedial Pathways for Incoming Students:** Reconsider placement practices for first-year writing courses and designate courses at all levels as credit-bearing.
11. **Evaluate Committees and APR Equity:** Conduct an internal audit of the work that is being done through committees and individual faculty members' APR. The goal would be to bring intentionality to the labor being done in committees and to set priorities for service work. In the same way, studying the distribution of APR would allow faculty members' time to align with the department's and institution's priorities and to make sure APR time is transparently and equitably distributed.