



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

English, Comparative Literature, & Linguistics

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To: Sheryl Fontaine, Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

From: Stephen Mexal, Chair, Department of English, Comparative Literature, and Linguistics

Date: April 22, 2020

Re: Department Response to Dean's Summary and Evaluation of the English and Comparative Literature Program Performance Review

Thank you for your summary and evaluation noting the many achievements of the English and Comparative Literature programs in the areas of student engagement, assessment, teaching quality, curriculum development, campus service, advising, and student success. The department looks forward to working with the Dean's office to pursue the priorities delineated in our Self-Study and in our response to the external reviewers' report. Below, we address the issues raised in the Dean's Summary and Evaluation.

As you note, our graduation rates have improved significantly since the last PPR. During the period under review, the department's 4-year graduation rate for freshmen majoring in English, as well as its 2-year graduation rates for transfer students majoring in English, exceeded the college's rate for the majority of the cohorts during the 5-year data period, and exceeded the university's 2- and 4-year graduation rate for every cohort during the 5-year data period. Of course, year-to-year variation in these rates is magnified by the small sample size of our cohorts. For instance, you observed that for the Fall 2015 cohort, the 4-year English graduation rate declined slightly below the previous cohort, as well as below the college average for that year. As you acknowledged, though, that decline is quite small indeed: fewer than two students. To put it slightly differently, if two additional English majors from the Fall 2015 cohort had graduated in four years, we would have not only exceeded the college graduation rate by two full percentage points, we would also have attained our second-highest 4-year graduation rate in eight years. While improvement may not be perfectly linear, we will nonetheless continue what is already working well, while also trying to identify new resources and promising practices to further improve graduation rates. That said, it's worth noting that the 2015 cohort took their major classes at a moment when the headcount of English majors was nearly at a five-year high, even while the number of tenured or tenure-track (T/TT) English faculty was at a five-year low. If improving graduation rates will be a challenge the English T/TT faculty will be tasked with, it stands to reason that additional faculty will help meet that challenge.

Freshmen retention is not unrelated to this larger issue of T/TT faculty headcount. You observed that the university saw an unusually low number of freshmen English majors retained in Fall 2018. Given that English majors do not take English courses until their sophomore year or later, English faculty typically play at best a peripheral role in their freshman year curricula. Because the department has neither selected these students for admission nor taught them in our major courses, our role in the university's efforts to retain them is limited, whether in Fall 2017, when the university's first-year retention rate for English majors was 90.2%, or in Fall 2018, when it was 81.8%. As you noted, we piloted a "One Book" program for freshmen English

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majors in the 2019-2020 academic year, and we agree it shows promise. This program, like other student success initiatives, is a form of faculty work that's not measurable in Full Time Equivalent Students (FTES). Indeed, because it and other similar programs are dependent on reassigning faculty time, it actually detracts, in however small a way, from classroom instruction. As we discussed in the Self-Study, the difficulty of accounting for faculty work that is extracurricular yet nevertheless serves student success—work including mentoring, advising, assessment, tracking graduation rates, and outreach—is one of the challenges facing this department, and arguably the university. Advising, in particular, has put an increased strain on the department. The university's advising expectations have become more intensive even as the number of T/TT faculty available for advising work have decreased. We appreciate your recognition of our freshman retention initiative, and note that with additional resources, particularly in the form of additional faculty personnel as well as non-FTES-based accounting tools, we could presumably participate more in the university's efforts to retain English majors who have not yet actually taken any English major courses.

We also note your attention to the equity gap, and share your concern with the success of our underrepresented minority (URM) English majors. However, it's not entirely correct that URM majors are uniformly graduating at increasingly lower rates than non-underrepresented minorities, as you imply. It is true that the 6-year graduation rate for the 2011-2013 cohorts saw the equity gap for URM English majors widen, from 2.9 in the 2011 cohort to 21.9 in the 2013 cohort. However, it's also true that for the 4-year graduation rate, the equity gap for URM English majors has narrowed dramatically. It narrowed from 22.9 in the 2011 cohort to 19.9 in the 2012 cohort, then again to 12.6 in the 2013 cohort. Then, in the 2014 and 2015 cohorts, we saw negative equity gaps of -5.2 and -8.2, respectively, for the 4-year graduation rate. In other words, for the 2014 and 2015 cohorts, we were graduating URM English majors at a higher 4-year graduation rate than non-URM English majors. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, the URM students graduating in four years are taking exactly the same classes with exactly the same professors as the URM students graduating in six years. Our ongoing efforts to diversify our curriculum and our faculty surely played a significant role in narrowing the equity gap for the 4-year graduation rate, as you suggest. We're deeply invested in the success of our students and will continue to consider why our dramatic improvements in narrowing the URM equity gap are reflected in the 4-year, but not the 6-year, graduation rate.

As we noted in the Self-Study, the availability of appropriate classrooms is integral to the successful operation of our department. The department offers more class sections than nearly any other department in the college, so it requires a large number of classrooms, particularly for our non-major writing classes. As you observed, some of those classrooms, which tend to be significantly smaller than any course offered in the major, at times go unused. (Such classrooms often seat around 23 students.) However, that fact is separate from the issue raised by the Self-Study and the external reviewers, which concerned the availability of appropriate classroom space for the major specifically (which tends to require classrooms that seat 40 or 60). Because of the centrality of FTES in the university's workload model, the ready availability of appropriate classrooms continues to be at the core of our ability to schedule strategically.

We are glad you understand our and the external reviewers' argument that more T/TT faculty are merited in our department. As discussed in the Self-Study, we have significantly fewer T/TT faculty than our peer English departments. In early 2020, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a report observing that students earn more English degrees from Cal State Fullerton

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than nearly any other campus in the Cal State system. Our three closest peers on that list—including Cal State Long Beach, which awards more English degrees than we do, as well as Cal State Northridge and Sacramento State, which award fewer—all have significantly more T/TT faculty than we do. We note your suggestion that one way of hiring additional faculty might be for current T/TT faculty to teach more non-major writing courses (e.g., ENGL 101 or 301), instead of courses in the major. Setting aside that full-time faculty already teach at least fourteen non-major writing classes per AY, you're correct that if fewer people teach courses in the major, we'll need additional people to teach those missing courses. Of course, this suggestion wouldn't lead to growth in the number of major course offerings, merely a continuation of the present amount. As we wrote in the Self-Study, one important outcome of increasing our T/TT ranks would be increasing the sum total of our major and graduate course offerings.

We also appreciate your attention to the student-faculty ratio (SFR). As the external reviewers noted, our class sizes are significantly larger than the recommendations of the Association of Departments of English. As you wrote, our allocated SFR of 20.56 FTES translates into a per-faculty average of just over 100 students each semester. However, that number doesn't account for the multiple faculty whose time is reassigned to work not translatable into FTES—that is, to administrative, advising, or other student success work. As a result, the benefit of that lower SFR may not be reflected in the lived experiences of the faculty or the students. For instance, as we noted in the Self-Study, at one point during the period under review two faculty members had the entirety of their time reassigned to administrative positions outside the department. This meant that their 400 students per academic year—students the official, allocated SFR assumed they were still teaching—actually needed to be taught by the rest of the faculty. Consequently, we are still using the same base model of calculating per-faculty teaching load as we were ten years ago (that is, assuming each faculty member will teach a course of 60 students, a course of 40 students, and a course of 18 or 27 students).

And though we appreciate that our SFR is lower than it was in the past, it's worth pointing out that this change was accomplished in part by the Dean's office's decision to decrease the number of faculty allocated to the English major. As we observed in the Self-Study, our FTEF in the major was 20 at the time of the last PPR. It's now 18. Part of the way our SFR was decreased was by lowering our FTEF allocation (the denominator in the FTES/FTEF equation), removing two full-time faculty allocated positions.

Given that the number of T/TT faculty has declined over the past five years, while the number of majors has grown over the same period, we are dedicated to recruiting and retaining an increased number of high-quality and diverse faculty with a stable 3/3 teaching load, courses in their specialties and access to travel funding, and supporting those faculty with workload tools that are appropriate for the department's significant, yet non-FTES producing, advising, student success, and administrative service obligations.

Thank you for your ongoing support of our department and its important role in the university.

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