Hal Koenig and Mike Unsworth were members of the Graduate Council team that reviewed the English Department in May of 2007. Hal and Mike met with Professor Ahearn on November 18th, 2009 to discuss significant issues raised in the Report from the review team.

**Department Strategic Plan**

Since the review in the spring term of 2007, there have been a number of organizational issues that the English department has faced. Larry Roper, served as interim dean of CLA from July 2007 to July 2008, and the new dean, Larry Rodgers, arrived on campus in September, 2008. In addition, the department has converted their courses from 3 credit hours to 4 credit hours (excepting ENG 100-level and WR 121, 201, 214, 222, 323, 327 and 330) which has been a sizable undertaking. These issues appear to have slowed the department’s response to the Graduate Council Report.

One of the primary recommendations in the Report was for the department to define itself and determine appropriate foci by creating a strategic plan. The department has begun to have discussions about focus, but for reasons mentioned above, this effort has not progressed to a state where it approaches a plan. Examples of progress include an effort to give MA students a more focused list of areas in literature for their thesis rather than leaving it wide open. In addition, there has been discussion about scaling back from offerings in all periods, genres, and national areas.

While these discussions are important for moving the department toward a strategic plan, the pace has been glacial. Waiting for things to settle down before pushing ahead on a plan will result in further delays and may result in another entity at OSU deciding or defining the English department’s mission and contribution to the university. It is in the interests of the Faculty to make sure that their vision for a redefined department is speedily clearly expressed. As noted in the Report from the review team, this effort should take into account the strengths of the department and how those strengths complement the needs and strategic direction of OSU. The Report recommended that the department define their own destiny – failure to seize this opportunity increases the chance that their purpose at OSU will be defined in ways they may not like.

During the discussion it was noted that the department has gone from 30 to 22.5 FTE. Professor Ahearn mentioned the University claim that the recent divisional reorganization would be associated with be some new faculty hires in CLA. Obviously, with the current Oregon revenue forecasts, it is not clear how soon this
might happen. Also, Professor Ahearn indicated that there would be a number of faculty members in the department retiring in the next five years. It is imperative that the department have a plan that guides these hiring decisions. In the near term it is a given that the department will be smaller than 30 FTE. Therefore, they should not seek automatically to replace a specialist scholar with another scholar in the same discipline – they need targeted hires to produce the correct mix of scholars that will create a great undergraduate and graduate experience for their students with a smaller faculty.

In the discussion with Professor Ahearn, there appeared to be a lack of enthusiasm regarding the strategic plan. Thinking about the discussion, maybe the concern was that it would lock the department into a particular path or configuration. One way around this problem could be for the plan to specify different staffing options for the department. For example, at the current staffing level (22.5 FTE), what would be the focus in the undergraduate major, how would the MA and MFA be staffed and at this staffing level what challenges or barriers exist? If the department was to increase their FTE to 25, how would the focus change at the undergraduate and graduate level, what specialties or areas would be reinforced with a second or third scholar, what specialties or areas would be added, and would any of the challenges of the lower staffing level be eliminated, and how much better would the department be with this level of staffing?

It is understood that the current staffing of 22.5 FTE is not good; it is clearly “lemons,” but how good or bad can the department’s “lemonade” be? With future retirements and targeted hiring how could it be better? The department must decide what their focus is going to be and decide what will be eliminated. How much better could the department be at 25 FTE? This is the question that the dean will likely ask when considering which departments get new faculty hires.

**Masters Degrees in English**

As noted in the Report, the MFA degree has been well received and Professor Ahearn confirmed this is still the case; this year there were applicants from 35 states and three foreign countries. As there are 28 other MFA programs in California, Oregon and Washington, it is clearly the reputation of the department’s faculty that draws applicants from a distance.

As part of the Review Team’s request for the English department to create a strategic plan, the department was asked to consider if continuing funding an MA degree was desirable, and if so, what the focus of the MA program should be. To the first question, Professor Ahearn raised a number of points. He noted that within the college, the department’s MA degree is highly valued, as not all CLA departments have a masters degree; therefore, eliminating the degree would be seen as a step backwards within the college. In addition, if the degree were to be eliminated then some faculty would be less likely to participate in graduate education and this would effectively create a caste system within the department. In short, the department has no intention of eliminating the MA degree.
To the question of focus in the MA degree, this should be part of the discussion when developing the strategic plan. A little movement has occurred on this front as the department is trying to limit the range of topics a student can select for an MA thesis. An additional problem is offering enough stand-alone classes (5xx) so students get a true graduate experience rather than a diluted graduate experience through slash classes (4xx/5xx) – obviously, this is exacerbated by running both an MA and an MFA degree program.

University Budgeting
The Review team report was highly critical of the past university practice of failing to fund essential core writing classes up-front. There has been some progress in university budgeting as this year there was a line item for about half of the Baccalaureate Core writing classes. Unfortunately, this still leaves the department in the untenable situation of never being able to balance revenue with expenses created by the large number of writing classes that support OSU’s undergraduate program. As such, any revenue from summer school or e-campus classes, two activities where revenue goes back to the unit, immediately vanishes into the huge amount of “red ink” created when OSU does not fund writing classes “up front.” This university practice undoubtedly destroys any faculty enthusiasm for new initiatives such as e-campus developments. Such initiatives might be very attractive to students on the Cascades campus.

While this is a follow-up for the Graduate Council, the continuing funding debacle created by failing to clearly support undergraduate writing classes must be noted, as it has a direct impact on instructor availability for the department’s graduate programs. Simply put, this is beyond unreasonable. For OSU to not directly fund the writing classes that support all undergraduate degrees on campus is irresponsible and reprehensible.

Hiring
Since the review visit in 2007, there has been one retirement; English retained the line and hired a new faculty member. While there is still only one tenure-track poet, there is an instructor who has now published his third volume of poetry and he provides significant assistance to the MFA program.

As noted above, there has been talk of the addition of 15-20 faculty lines in CLA. As the largest department in the college, English hopes to see their share, but it is unlikely that anything will happen until the economy turns around and the state revenue projections increase. The English department will make a much stronger case for their share of these lines with a well reasoned strategic plan that shows how their strengths complement OSU’s direction.