The external review of the University of Kentucky English Department took place on Nov. 2-3, 2006; the external review committee was convened by Steven L. Hoch, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences on the evening of November 1, 2006. The external review team included Patrick O’Donnell (Chair of the Department of English, Michigan State University), Valerie Lee (Chair of the Department of English, Ohio State University), James Albisetti (Department of History, University of Kentucky), and Brandon Look (Department of Philosophy, University of Kentucky). During the visit of the external review team, we met with the departmental administration team and program directors, most of the individual members of the faculty, groups of undergraduate and graduate students, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the deans of the College of Arts and Sciences. Our exchanges with all parties were cordial and informative: in general, the review team felt that students, faculty, and administrators were forthcoming and candid in their views, and that the members of the English Department view their future as promising and wish to work together collectively to achieve their goals. This report consists of the following narrative followed by a list of recommendations.

The Department has been through a good deal with the departure of several key senior faculty within a very short period of time and continues to experience some of the fallout from what must have been a chaotic period in the life of the Department, but in the internal review there is a reasonable degree of self-examination and self-reflection about what issues need to be addressed and what goals need to be achieved. This, combined with strong support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (surely reflected in the allocation of six tenure-system positions for searches to take place this year) suggests that the Department is on the right track in rebuilding itself and that the College and University recognize the value of the English Department, though it is our view that more robust planning and administrative consistency must be achieved if the Department hopes to make significant progress on its aspirations. Indeed, many faculty expressed a sense of optimism that the department was at the beginning of a new era, and that having the capacity to build continuity in the Department over the next several years will help to assure success in fulfilling the Department’s goals and aspirations. One of those aspirations—to be a top twenty English Department by 2020—is one shared by dozens of departments at peer institutions across the country. In our view, this is an aspiration that requires resources well beyond the means of most institutions if “the top twenty” is perceived to be those institutions, departments, and programs that have perennially appeared at the top of the list of NRC or U.S. News and World Report rankings for half a century. Perhaps a more operable, or descriptive goal would be aspire to achieve status as a department that serves a diverse array of undergraduate students in the study of literature, writing, and teaching, and that has a strong and active graduate program with key, nationally visible field or cross-field strengths, a highly productive faculty across the board, and strong collaborative linkages to the rest of the University and the community. Some planning has already taken place that would achieve these goals: many faculty in the Department perceive its current strengths as existing in the capacious (and, to some degree, overlapping) fields of American Literature/Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural
Studies, and if there is general agreement on this amongst the faculty, then we would encourage the Department to continue building or rebuilding and adding strength in these areas. At the same time, the six searches taking place this year do not reveal a pattern of decision-making about the Department’s strengths, priorities, or directions, even as those positions may fill needs in the Department as viewed comprehensively. In our view, the Department needs to engage in the difficult conversation about “coverage” vs. “focus” and make decisions about its strengths/priorities and develop a relevant long-term hiring plan that reflects those priorities. To the extent that the more general pattern of hiring taking place this year can speak to strengths and priorities in terms of the qualifications of individual candidates recruited and appointed, so much the better, but we feel that the Department should have an immediate and ongoing conversation about questions of strengths, priorities, and the identity and visibility of the Department that could affect this year’s hiring in practice and future hiring in principle.

Speaking as well to the shape and strengths of the Department, the external review team believes that the Department in conversation with the College administration needs to advance with all due speed toward making a decision about the possibility of a separate Linguistics Department. Our conversations with faculty did not turn up a great deal of controversy about whether the Linguistics faculty should stay in English or move to separate Department status. It appeared to us, however, that this is a move the Linguistics faculty would like to undertake, and it is one that would allow both the faculty remaining in English and those moving to Linguistics to more clearly define and pursue separable goals and priorities. What was apparent to us was that the uncertainty about whether the Linguistics faculty would stay in English or move to a separate department is causing some tension amongst faculty, and has contributed to the lack of clarity about the Department’s direction. Because the current Acting Chair—whom the faculty generally regard as balanced, fair-minded, and doing his job well—is a linguist who may or may not continue to serve as Department chair pending the outcome of an internal search process, we believe that a clear decision needs to be made as soon as possible about the question of a separate Linguistics Department. If the decision is, indeed, to separate, then we believe it would make most sense for the Center for English as a Second Language and the TESL program to be housed in the new Department of Linguistics as well.

As the Department rebuilds, the faculty and administration need to consider securing funding for appointments at the senior level. The senior faculty has been decimated by the many departures from its ranks over the last few years, and the availability (or lack thereof) of senior leadership in the Department is of considerable concern. There has been a rapid turnover of personnel in the Department administration as the result of these departures, and associate professors and, in one case, an assistant professor, are bearing an inordinate amount of responsibility for administering the Department. This has several consequences: the rapidity of turnover means that administrators and directors in given positions cannot adequately learn their jobs or provide direction before the position rotates through to a new person, nor can effective transitions between occupants of these positions be achieved; associate and assistant professors bearing these responsibilities must devote considerable percentages of their effort to administration and service, when
they should be progressing toward promotion and building research careers that would lead toward greater visibility and national recognition for the department in alignment with its “top twenty” aspirations. We recommend that several hires over the next few years be made at the senior (full professor) level with a view toward recruiting faculty who can provide leadership and administrative expertise; the Department and the College may want to consider the possibility of a national search for a new department chair at some point in the near future.

The Department has experienced inconsistency not only in terms of the stability of its senior faculty, but also with the junior faculty as well, though all of the current assistant professors we talked to felt that they are being well-mentored and are supported by their colleagues as the progress toward the promotion and tenure decision. However, based on information provided to us by Chairperson Clayton, we note with concern that over the last twelve years, 16 assistant professors have been reviewed for tenure and promotion; of these, 8 were tenured, 6 were denied tenure, and 2 left for other positions before the end of the probationary period. Thus, tenure denials occurred in 38% of the assistant professor pool, an unusually high number of negative decisions. The department chairs on the team from Michigan State University and Ohio State University both noted that there was nothing even close to this percentage of promotion and tenure denials in their home departments, and the colleagues from the Departments of History and Philosophy at UK noted as well that within their departments this would be regarded as a very high percentage of negative decisions. The large number of negative promotion and tenure decisions, combined with the rapid departure of a number of senior faculty over the last four years, indicates that there may be a fundamental problem in the Department with the recruitment of younger faculty prepared to work in a doctoral/research-intensive institution and department, the mentoring and professional development of those faculty, and the retention of successful senior faculty. We urge the English Department faculty, as an integral part of its planning discussions, to openly discuss the historic pattern of tenure denials and the departures of senior faculty in order to discern why this may have occurred (the twinned patterns indicate something other than sheer serendipity) and what steps can be taken to remedy it, particularly as the department engages in the program of rebuilding itself.

In looking at the current condition of the graduate program, we commend the Department’s stated goals of engaging in the aggressive recruitment of minority students, increasing the yield of applications, and improving the working conditions of TAs. We underscore the recognition that the English TA instructional load of 12 credits/year is quite high, whether this parses out to a 2-1 or 2-2 teaching load. This load is approximately double that at many major research institutions with successful Ph.D. programs, and the UK colleagues in History and Philosophy noted that TAs in their own departments do not bear a teaching load at this level. A high TA teaching load negatively affects the chances of recruiting top-quality students to the program; it slows the time to degree, and saps the morale of graduate students who should be teaching as part of their professional development, but at a level appropriate to their status as students pursuing research degrees. The matter of an unusually high teaching load for TAs (and teaching careers at UK devoted almost entirely to teaching freshman composition) is tied to
another problem with which the Department is coping—the low yield on recruitment over the last few years. Indeed, we were informed that this year the Department was not able to fill all of the TA lines available to it for recruitment of new students and support of continuing students. With declining enrollment, a number of graduate courses and seminars inevitably will teeter on the brink of cancellation due to low enrollment, and this has consequences for present and future faculty in a research-active department who will not have the opportunity to teach advanced graduate students on a regular basis, thus making the retention of highly successful senior faculty more difficult. We also heard from some graduate students that they felt an insufficient array of seminars was being offered, particularly seminars that work in broader areas of preparation for teaching in recognized fields of the profession. We encourage the Department and College to begin considering ways to reduce the TA teaching load and, with that impetus, to develop a more robust program of recruitment based on more attractive support conditions, including aggressively increasing fellowship support, external and endowment funding, and conversion of available resources to support a 1/1 teaching load for graduate assistants. One development in the graduate program is worthy of special note: the recruitment of senior, nationally prominent faculty in American Literature not currently teaching at doctoral institutions to serve on UK graduate student committees and to provide short-term seminars. We believe that this is a creative way of enhancing graduate education in American Literature at UK that could be extended to other areas of interest in the Department; at the same time, we caution that faculty brought in as affiliates not be viewed as somehow replacing or standing in for senior-level faculty in areas of departmental strength who would be hired as full-fledged tenure-system UK English faculty contributing in all of the areas of the mission. The Committee also notes that the public representation of the graduate program on the website and the hard copies of graduate program materials we received do not always match up, and that the graduate handbook needs to be more detailed about the program’s requirements; overall, we recommend an updating of the department’s website, especially in regards to information about graduate studies.

Turning to the undergraduate program and the English major, we encourage the Department’s inquiry into the question of why enrollments in its major have not risen in a manner corresponding to the 30% increase in the undergraduate population at the University over the last several years; ideally, this examination would yield a set of effective recruitment strategies for the major. The undergraduates we talked with felt that the faculty was generally quite supportive and responsive, yet for several, there seemed to be a lack of transparency to students about the rationale for the major in its structure and requirements, and that for some students the advising was inconsistent, especially in the area of teacher education. We suggest that the Department consider more effective ways to deliver undergraduate advising, either by putting into place an academic advising specialist or developing a core group of faculty who understand the major well and who are committed to quality advising. Students also expressed concern that there was not a capstone course for the major (something the Department is currently working on developing), and that specific course offerings varied considerably in scope and focus such that they felt they were not receiving a broad foundation in the major. We note that the Department is working on a revision of English 230 to make it more focused on
developing close reading and critical analysis skills: we encourage this revision, as it will be key to providing undergraduate majors with the foundation they seek. Students also expressed concern that course offerings were not as broadly available as they might be, primarily because a large number of offerings in the major were offered on a TuTh basis, rather than a MWF basis: clearly, while most faculty prefer a two-day instructional schedule over a three-day schedule, not offering an array of courses across the week has negative impact on students’ ability to take courses, and perhaps on enrollment in English courses and the major. We would encourage the department administration to develop a fair rotation of teaching schedules that would allow for more MWF courses or, alternatively, if possible within the University scheduling mechanism, to develop MW offerings. In talking to several parties about the writing program, we perceived confusion about the development and goals of English 104 as the one-semester required first-year writing course, which is, as we understand it, taught entirely by TAs and part-time instructors. The burden of delivering this course which annually provides 14,000 hours of credit instruction to 3,600 students is massive, and we fully recognize the difficulties of ensuring consistency in a course of this kind taught by a large number of graduate students and part-time instructors of varying capacities and levels of preparation: the current Writing Program administration does so with relatively few staff. We fully encourage the Department’s intention to assess the first-year writing program, but would advise that it do so in the next 1-2 years, rather than some time in the next 6 years, in order to provide a more responsive assessment of its efficacy as a one-semester first-year writing requirement when, comparatively, most institutions in the University of Kentucky’s peer require two semesters of first-year writing. We note the increasing pressure on 200-level English courses that the Department is delivering for the benefit of students across the University: it is important that the Department receive the resources to teach such courses as the 200-level Business English course, preferably from the other colleges whose students benefit from and are required to take these courses.

In considering other constituencies in the Department (part-time and term faculty; staff) we wish to make the following observations:

--The full-time lecturers we talked with are hard-working and committed to delivering quality instruction, yet, even though many of them have served in this capacity for a number of years, they do not feel that they are part of the department in any meaningful way. We would encourage the Department to consider ways it might involve full-time faculty members who are serving the department in term-system capacity in Department governance, or to elicit their response and feedback to important issues (such as, for example, changes in the undergraduate curriculum) that affect them. We also encourage the College to develop the means to offer full-time lecturers more stability of employment that semester-by-semester or year-by-year contracts offer, as well as clarify and stabilize whatever faculty benefits accrue to them.

--the Department staff are generally pleased to be working in the English Department, and expressed their appreciation for the professional attitudes that faculty demonstrate towards them. In discussion with the staff, it seemed to the Committee that
some examination of staff classifications is in order with the goal of reclassifying staff positions to bring them in alignment with current UK Human Resources guidelines.

Finally, the Committee wishes to encourage the Department to consider how it might develop its public engagement and outreach capacities. Public land-grant institutions such as the University of Kentucky are moving toward new models of public engagement and public humanities consonant with their changing missions in the twenty-first century; we would encourage the Department to begin thinking about how it wishes to strategize and articulate its engagement with the public in light of University-wide initiatives, as it is in a unique position to develop this kind of engagement given its commitments, both current and potential, to teacher education, writing instruction, creative work in the community, and cultural studies.
Summary of Recommendations

- The department needs to focus several future hires in areas of demonstrable or emergent strengths.
- The department/College needs to consider allocating resources for several future hires at the senior level.
- Greater consistency needs to be built into the rotation of administrative responsibilities, and these need to be located more often in the full professoriate.
- The decision about forming Linguistics as a separate department should be made as soon as possible.
- The department needs to discuss its tenure history over the last ten years, and consider improvements to support and mentoring of junior faculty that will lead to a stronger record of successful tenurings and retentions.
- TA teaching loads need to be reduced.
- More consistent and robust recruitment to graduate programs needs to take place.
- Strategies for increasing enrollments to the undergraduate major need to be put into action.
- The undergraduate advising system needs to be reviewed and made more effective; undergraduate course scheduling needs to be more consistent across the week to provide maximum opportunities for majors.
- The writing curriculum, especially English 104, needs to be reviewed and revised as appropriate.
- The role of full-time lecturers as participants in the life and governance of the department need to be clarified and improved.
- Some staff classifications need to be reconsidered in light of changing responsibilities.
- Public engagement and outreach opportunities need to be explored, planned, and activated.