DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS (MA/PhD and MFA)

The UI Department of English has 268 graduate students currently enrolled in its three degree programs, the MA/PhD in Literary Studies, the MFA in Nonfiction Writing, and the MFA in Creative Writing. English is central to the activities of the Writing University and enjoys close ties to the Center for the Book, the International Writing Program, International Programs, and other CLAS units. English is home to the third largest undergraduate major on campus (currently at 940 students), the General Education Literature program, the newly launched Creative Writing track for undergraduate majors, and three distinguished departmental journals. English Department graduate students participate in a large and vibrant scholarly community dedicated to literature, writing, and teaching.

MA/PhD in Literary Studies
Mission Statement

The PhD in Literary Studies aims to produce scholar-teachers, trained in the discipline of English, knowledgeable of a range of theoretical approaches and historical periods, adept in current pedagogical practices, and accomplished as scholarly writers. English PhDs are well-prepared to assume tenure-track positions at four-year colleges and research universities. The MA is currently available as an option for students who do not choose to complete the PhD, however, in light of increasing interest in the MA from prospective applicants attracted to the Writing University, we admitted five strong MA students this year and are considering options for expanding the program, as described under “Program Characteristics” below.

Admissions Process and Criteria

Demand and recruitment

Our MA/PhD program is nationally competitive, with applications for admission steadily increasing since 2001, and peaking at 213 in 2008-2009. We routinely admit approximately one fourth of applicants and enroll one tenth or fewer, aiming for a target cohort of 16-19 students per year. (For AY 2009-2010, 212 applied, 42 were admitted, and 20 accepted; for AY 2008-2009, these figures were 213/42/18). Our admit-to-enroll ratio reflects the fact that we are competing against other top PhD programs to which our students have also been accepted. Our biggest admissions challenge remains enrolling the top applicants whom we admit; some of the strongest applicants regularly select competing schools because they offer better financial support.

Criteria and diversity

Students are selected for admission to the MA/PhD program based on their academic promise and fit with our faculty strengths. Our admissions committee pays particular attention to qualitative assessments of student work, especially the scholarly writing sample, which is reviewed by at least two faculty members. Quantitative metrics complement the former criteria in our evaluation of applicants: the average GPA of incoming students and verbal GREs are somewhat higher than they are in other UI humanities disciplines, while analytical scores are on a par with other humanities units (GPA 3.6 versus 3.54 across UI humanities; verbal GRE 638 versus 595 in 2007). One marker of the strength of our incoming classes is the number of Presidential Fellows we enroll, two per year on average (2 in 2009; 10 from 2004-2008). We work hard to attract a diverse student cohort and have enjoyed success in this area, as is reflected in the number of Dean’s Fellows we admit, 2.5 per year on average (3 in 2009; 16 from 2004-2008) and in the fact that twenty percent of our current MA/PhD student population consists of under-represented minorities.

Financial aid commitments

The size of our PhD program is calibrated to the number of students that we can responsibly support. We offer six years of aid to students admitted with a BA, and five years for students admitted with an MA or
a Presidential Fellowship, provided that they maintain satisfactory progress toward the degree. (MA students
do not receive aid). First-year PhD students are typically assigned below half-time positions as discussion
section leaders and graders for our new Introduction to the English Major course and other lecture courses,
while other first-years help to staff our undergraduate advising office, and a few experienced instructors go
directly into Rhetoric TA assignments. After the first year, students in good standing can usually expect to
proceed to two years of teaching in the Rhetoric Department followed by two years of teaching in the
General Education Literature program and a sixth year either teaching in Gen Ed Lit or on a dissertation year
fellowship. English PhD students are quite successful in competing for internal and external fellowships, as
noted below under “Program Outcomes.”

Program Outcomes

Time-to-degree and completion rate

The median time-to-degree for the PhD in English is 7 years (for students entering 1996-2000), and
the average is 8 years (for students graduating 2003-2008). These figures are greater than we desire, but still
less than the national average for the field of English, which is 9 years median from BA to PhD (2006 ADE
Report on Survey of Earned Doctorates). Our completion rate is 42% for students entering 1996-2000;
among that population, as of July 2008, 25% were still in-house, while 20% took the MA, and only 12% left
without a degree. These figures do not reflect the future impact of recent measures that the department has
taken to bring time-to-degree in closer alignment with graduate funding packages by streamlining the degree
at two crucial junctures, the comprehensive exam and the prospectus meeting. The comprehensive exam
now combines portfolio preparation with an oral examination; the portfolio components include a
publishable article and two syllabi that ideally lead to the dissertation writing and job application processes,
respectively. More recently, through grants from the Graduate College Strategic Initiative Funds, we have
been awarding a course release to eight meritorious post-comprehensive students each year, so that they can
move promptly toward their prospectus meetings. We have likewise altered the requirements for the
prospectus so that its format lends itself to adaptation as a grant proposal. The Director of Graduate Studies
now reviews the six-year path to the PhD with all incoming PhD students, and the timeline is prominently
displayed on the first page of our graduate program website.

Fellowships, awards, and honors

Our graduate students garner substantial competitive honors and disciplinary recognition during their
graduate career. Two to three English PhD students per year on average have received Seashore/Ballard
Fellowships (2 in 2009; 13 from 2004-2008), and one has received a Marcus Bach Fellowship (2007-2008).
In order to support additional deserving students during their dissertation year, the Department has instituted
two dissertation year teaching fellowships, the Seely Fellowship (1999) and the Dietz Fellowship (2007);
these are funded through a combination of donor funds and remuneration for teaching a single major course.
English Department graduate students have also been successful in national fellowship competitions,
including the Newcombe Fellowship of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation/ACLS Early Career Fellowship, and the Mellon Research and Dissertation Award. Finally, as
evidence of the strong scholarship coming out of our program, in the two past humanities dissertation award
cycles, one of our PhD students received the Spriestersbach Prize and went on to receive the CGS/UMI
Distinguished Dissertation Award (Chasar, 2007), while another has just received the Graduate Dean’s
Distinguished Dissertation Award (Miller, 2009). We annually nominate students as departmental delegates
to participate in exceptional professionalization opportunities, including the CIC Summer Seminar, the
School for Criticism and Theory (Cornell U), the Futures of American Studies Institute (Dartmouth U), and
Dickens Universe (UC Santa Cruz). Finally, our students publish their own journal, the Iowa Journal of
Cultural Studies, and organize an annual conference, titled Craft, Critique, Culture.

Placement

Our excellent placement record is perhaps the most important indicator of our PhD program’s
success. The majority of our graduating students elect to seek tenure-track positions in higher education. We
take placement seriously, from insisting on breadth and depth in terms of disciplinary formation to providing a range of opportunities for our students to become outstanding teachers and researchers. Over the years, successive placement directors have established an effective program that begins advising prospective job applicants in the week before fall classes start and sees them through the on-campus interview stage. For the five-year period from 2003-2008, 88% of our PhDs obtained initial placements in academic positions, and 49% held initial tenure-track positions. These statistics are impressive, given the growing trend in the field toward shorter time-to-degree, followed by one to three “grooming” years spent in postdocs and visiting positions prior to assuming one’s first tenure-track position. Even in last year’s miserable job market, with advertised positions in English down by approximately 26% (MLA Midyear report on MLA Job Information List 2008-2009), twelve out of seventeen of our prospective applicants secured academic positions. Over the past five years, our students have landed tenure-track positions at a number of leading colleges and Research I institutions, including Arizona State University, UC San Diego, Butler University, Yeshiva University, Purdue University, and Wake Forest University. Our recent graduates also participate in the CIC Postdoctoral Program. It is our intention that every student who wants a position can get one.

Program characteristics

Size and ranking
The Department of English PhD program is ranked fifteenth among public universities according to US News and World Report. Total enrollment in the MA/PhD program has remained more or less constant at around 110-120 for the past five years, with the current in-house population numbering 119. This size allows for individualized interaction with faculty, since PhD students are served by some 43 FTE faculty positions. Students select dissertation directors according to field of interest (with the exception of untenured faculty, whom we protect from major service commitments), and the graduate student population is well distributed across the available faculty.

Strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities
Our PhD/MA program strengths include a favorable faculty-to-student ratio, excellent placement record, and an outstanding record of graduate student scholarship, recognition, and professionalization. Another strength is a tradition of good governance at the faculty and graduate student levels. Student representatives sit on the Department’s Executive Committee and the Grad Steering Committee and take an active role in departmental affairs; there is a strong sense of community among the graduate students and between students and faculty. The MA/PhD graduate program conducts frequent self-assessments, most recently in 2005 and 2007, which have resulted in our adopting measures to improve the quality of the program.

One weakness of our program is our inability to recruit the very best applicants to our program and substantially decrease time-to-degree for existing students, due to the limited financial support and heavy teaching load we currently offer. For all our efforts, the single force that most disrupts our students’ time to degree is the weight of teaching, since a half-time teaching position consists of a three-course load in either Rhetoric or Gen Ed Lit. If we could reduce the standard graduate teaching load to 1/1, that would place our program on a par with the majority of our peer programs (ADE 2004-2005 Guide to Doctoral Programs). A second weakness of our PhD program is our inability to make offers to strong international applicants whose English-speaking skills may not initially qualify them for teaching assistantships, now that the block allocation as a source of non-teaching grad income is no longer available. Finally, a third weakness is the lack of adequate funding for graduate student professional development, including support for conference and research travel and for attending MLA job interviews.

We are currently considering several options for developing areas of the MA/PhD program, including instituting a post-doctoral teaching fellowship for recent graduates, during which recipients could develop their doctoral thesis as a scholarly book. We are also considering expanding the MA, either as a professional development program targeted at those who wish to go into publishing and related fields, or as a five-year BA/MA program that would prepare our English majors for admission to competitive PhD programs.
MFA in Nonfiction Writing
Mission Statement
The MFA in Nonfiction Writing prepares students to be writers and teachers of a professional and artistic caliber in one of the myriad forms of nonfiction. An integral part of the Department of English, the NWP is a three-year MFA Program, and although there is no ranking system for non-fiction writing programs, it is widely considered the top such program in the nation.

Admissions Process and Criteria
In the last five years, the selectivity of the program has increased from an admission rate of approximately 32% in 2004 to a consistent average admission rate of between 15%-17% over the last three years, during which applications have averaged around 100. Many of our students (selected by the quality of their manuscript submissions and letters of recommendation) are recruited from Ivy League institutions and of all students accepted, only one or two a year go elsewhere. Our closest competitor is Columbia University, with which we compete for the top students.

The NWP makes an effort to recruit minority students through the Graduate College’s Dean Minority Fellowships, on average recruiting two minority fellows a year. We also attract minority students who do not receive such fellowships, but other aid.

We try to fund all incoming students at varying levels and typically have only one or two students without funding. We also award Iowa Arts Fellowships, two of which are guaranteed each year, with a third fellowship possible on a competitive basis with other graduate programs. Since the inception of the competitive award, we have received one every year. Most of the rest of our students teach in either the Gen Ed Lit program, for the Rhetoric Dept, or in our own Intro to Nonfiction offerings.

In addition, we have initiated programs in collaboration with others, such as The UI Museum of Arts Fellowships in which four of our students per year receive a stipend from the museum and give a public reading. Our students have been successful three times in the last five years in applying for the Marcus Bach Fellowship, a university-wide competition supporting dissertation or thesis work.

Program Outcomes
In the past five years, our graduates have secured twenty-one full time academic appointments and ten editorial or other professional appointments. MFA programs are measured not merely in terms of employment but in terms of artistic output. Our recent graduates have published (or have under contract) more than twenty-two single-author books with nationally recognized publishers. Our recent graduates have received at least eight prestigious national fellowships or awards, including Fulbrights, the Rona Jaffe Award (which carries with it a $25,000 prize), and various literary prizes.

Program Characteristics
Approximately 45-50 students are enrolled in the program with a class size that generally fluctuates between 12 and 16. Our program is a magnet for teachers and students of nonfiction who attend our biennial conference NonfictioNow, which draws over 400 attendees and brings great prominence to our program. For the past five years, we have made an effort to internationalize our program via a highly successful Overseas Writing Workshop in the summer to countries including the Philippines, France, China, Croatia, Slovenia, and Australia. In addition, we offer a fellowship for a month’s residence at La Muse Inn near Carcassonne, France, for current students and alumni of the program.

One of the major strengths of our program is that our attachment to the English department affords students the opportunity to work with literary scholars, thus deepening the breadth of their own work. NWP students also work for The Iowa Review, many as volunteers and one as a research assistant.

We have moved in recent years to give more focus and guidance to our students (a weakness in the past) by creating more specific requirements, including an MFA prospectus meeting; adding a new required core course in the History of the Essay; and creating a detailed graduate handbook.
MFA in Creative Writing

Mission Statement
The mission of the Program in Creative Writing, known as the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, is to matriculate, instruct, and graduate the very best emerging fiction writers and poets. We granted the world’s first graduate degrees in creative writing, and for seventy-three years we have been the number one program. We believe that creative genius cannot be taught but that gifted writers can be encouraged through exposure to very fine faculty and a large, high quality peer group.

Admissions Process and Criteria
National demand for our program’s resources is extremely high. In 2009, the program received 1210 applicants, 843 in fiction and 367 in poetry. Our goal in admissions is to bring the best writers among this group to Iowa. Our primary criteria for admission to the Workshop is, and always has been, the quality of the creative manuscript submitted with the application. Because of differences in the genre, poetry and fiction admissions procedures differ. All poetry faculty members read each of the manuscripts submitted. They then meet to discuss and choose the incoming class. Because fiction manuscripts are much longer and there are a greater number of applicants, fiction manuscripts are evaluated by first readers. The Director then looks at each manuscript and chooses 50-60 as finalists. The finalists’ manuscripts are then read by the other members of the fiction faculty, who help choose the strongest candidates, to whom we offer admission. Because of its reputation, the Workshop has generally been successful in matriculating the students to whom it offers admission.

Program Outcomes
The quality of our program receives its true test after students graduate, through book contracts, prizes, and fellowships. Our program’s graduates continue to dominate the ranks of those who receive distinction in these areas. For example, Iowa had by a substantial margin the highest number of stories chosen for the Best New American Voices anthology of fiction from all writing programs. Four of the ten current Stegner Fellows in Fiction are Iowa graduates, and three of the last six postgraduate fellowships in fiction given by the Creative Writing Program at the University of Wisconsin have been given to Iowa graduates. In 2007-08, Workshop graduates were represented among the winners of the National Book Awards, the Pulitzer Prizes, the MacArthur Fellowships, the Whiting Foundation Awards, the Guggenheim Fellowships, and the National Book Critics Circle Awards. Our students and faculty combined have won approximately 33% of all Pulitzer Prizes given in fiction and poetry over the last 20 years.

Program Characteristics
Approximately 100 students are enrolled in the two-year program (half in poetry and half in fiction), with a class size that generally fluctuates between 10-12 for workshops. All students receive financial aid in the form of fellowships, graduate assistantships, or scholarships. All students attend an intensive weekly workshop in either fiction or poetry. Students also may attend faculty seminars and craft classes. All students complete an MFA exam and an MFA thesis before graduating after two years. Our graduation rate is approximately 98%. Our faculty consists of four full-time professors in fiction and three full-time professors in poetry, with one half-time poetry position unfilled at this time. The faculty are augmented by distinguished visiting faculty, who teach workshops and seminars in their genre. In recent years, we have moved to equalize funding for our students, provide a greater number of fellowships, improve the quality of faculty mentorship, increase post-graduate opportunities on and off campus, and raise money for student scholarships from private sources.

Conclusion
The strengths of the English Department MA/PhD and MFA programs include our dedicated and productive faculty, who provide up-to-date and attentive teaching and careful guidance on scholarly and creative work, and a strong, cohesive graduate student population. Weaknesses chiefly relate to insufficient resources in some areas, evident in our inability to fund various elements of graduate student recruitment and professional development. Such challenges notwithstanding, the English Department graduate programs are central to the University mission and examples of scholarly excellence.