Department of Linguistics Graduate Degree Program Strategic Assessment

Mission

We have taken as our basic mission the creation of a unique program with a rigorous curriculum that emphasizes the core subdisciplines of linguistics (phonetics/phonology and syntax) combined with both theoretical and practical study of first and second language acquisition, as well as study of specific language areas, including African languages, South and Southeast Asian languages, Germanic languages, and Slavic languages. Our goal is to create a learning and research environment unique in the field of linguistics that not only nurtures our own graduate students and helps them develop their full potential, but also provides opportunities for graduate students in other programs whose home departments are unable to offer the linguistics training they require.

At the MA level, some students focus on Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and receive a (terminal) degree that prepares them to teach ESL at universities in this country or abroad. The curriculum combines theoretical work in linguistics and second language acquisition with pedagogical training and practical experience, positioning our students to successfully meet the challenges of teaching in the very best programs. Other MA students focus on core areas of theoretical linguistics and either continue for PhDs in linguistics or related fields at other institutions or enter our PhD Program.

The goal of the PhD program is to create outstanding scholars and teachers, uniquely trained in theoretical linguistics, language description and language acquisition, who are equipped to engage in original and innovative research and who will make lifelong contributions in diverse areas of language study. Many of our PhD students have become qualified to teach ESL, making them particularly marketable: they are able to obtain positions in larger research oriented linguistics programs or departments as well as in English departments where there is one person responsible for training future ESL teachers and teaching linguistics courses.

The graduate program contributes centrally to core aspects of the University’s mission. Graduate students from a variety of disciplines, including Anthropology, Asian Languages and Literature, Computer Science, the Foreign Language Acquisition Research and Education program, German, Spanish and Portuguese, and others, regularly enroll in our courses. In fact, many of our core courses are required in major tracks of other PhD programs. Because of our faculty strength and solid curriculum, we are able to offer essential courses that would otherwise be unavailable to students in those programs, e.g. FLARE and Spanish and Portuguese. Contributions to the University research mission include not only our substantial number of research presentations and journal and book publications, but also our hosting of a number of important regional and international conferences that involve graduate students in our department as well as in allied departments. Together with our ESL programs, outreach activities have included work with employees at area companies (e.g. Aegon), special programs for universities in other countries, and special programs such as our ESL classes for migrant workers, funded by a Year of Public Engagement (YPE) Grant, Office of the President of the University of Iowa.

Program Outcomes

Degree Completion and Time-to-Degree. Due in part to our selectivity in admissions, we have a very high rate of completion among our PhD students. Since 2001, 7 students have received their degrees and an 8th has made the final deposit of her dissertation and her degree will be awarded in December. During that time only 3 students abandoned their studies (all for compelling personal reasons). Thus our completion rate exceeds 70%. The first 4 students had an average time to degree of 8.5 years, owing in part to the fact that 2 of these students took time off from their programs to start families. Still, this time to degree did not meet the Department's expectations; consequently we reconfigured aid packages to students in an attempt to relieve the unusually heavy demand placed on our TAs who were teaching two ESL courses each semester. As a result of this and other changes, we have successfully reduced the time to degree so that the 4 most recent degree recipients averaged only 6 years from entry in the program to completion of PhD. Although some might like to see this time reduced further, given the fact that most students do not enter the program with a BA in linguistics, 6 years is a reasonable and realistic time to degree. Additionally, it is below the average time to degree for nearly all UI humanities programs.

Fellowships, awards, honors, and presentations/publications. Our PhD students are competitive and extremely productive, which we take as a sign of the success of our curriculum. In the past two years, 4 students received Graduate College Summer Fellowships, as did one other in 2005; and one student was awarded a Ballard-Seashore fellowship in 2006. In 2008, 3 students received Cleary Fellowships for international research, and another won a Stanley Foundation Grant from International Programs. Some students have secured funding for their research, both internal (e.g. Graduate Student Senate) and external (e.g. Fundação Luso-Americana in Portugal). Our students regularly qualify for travel funds from the Graduate Student Senate and International Programs. Additionally, our students are exceptionally active in the scholarly life of the field of linguistics. Since 2004, our students have made
28 presentations at refereed conferences—7 regional, 13 national, and 8 international. They have also published 20 refereed articles, either singly authored or co-authored with faculty. This includes 5 journal articles, 5 book chapters, and 10 papers in conference proceedings. This recognition from the field reflects well on the program and the University.

Graduate Student Placements. Our PhD graduates have a high rate of success in the job market. As in many other disciplines, the most desirable placements are in tenure-track positions and in administrative or research positions at major research universities. Seven of the eight graduates who finished their degree requirements since 2001 are working in linguistics or an allied field at a college or university, five in the United States and two abroad. Of the 4 students who completed their degree requirements in 2009, all are teaching at the college/university level, 2 in tenure-track positions. Our PhD students have obtained full-time tenure track and administrative positions at Indiana State University, East Carolina State University, the University of Florida, University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Georgetown University, Korea University, Kirkwood Community College, the American University of the Middle East, Chungnam National University, and Yale University, among others.

Our MA students with TESL focus are also very successful, competing for the best jobs teaching ESL. Graduates have obtained positions in college and university ESL programs both in this country (including Brown, Wellesley, Kansas State, Ohio University, Texas A&M, and the universities of Illinois, Oregon, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin at La Crosse, and in Iowa at UNI, Divine Word College and SE Community College) and abroad (including positions in Brazil, Spain, the Netherlands, France, China, Korea, Japan, Germany, and the Czech Republic).

Admissions Processes and Criteria

MA Program. As most applicants for graduate work in linguistics do not have undergraduate degrees in the field, we admit most to the MA program first, most without aid, unless they already have an MA or their application shows exceptional promise. Also, we recruit some of our most outstanding undergraduate majors (GPA >3.5) to our highly successful BA/MA program. Starting in Fall 2006, 50% of those admitted enrolled in our program; that number was 67% in 2007 and 57% in 2008. We have consciously worked to increase the proportion of students seeking PhDs, which has decreased the amount of financial aid that we have available to incoming MA students. While this impacted the number of students enrolling in the MA program somewhat, we have still been able to maintain a healthy cohort in the program. For Fall 2009, we admitted 63% of those who applied to the MA program. Of the eight who were admitted, six enrolled in the program—a yield of 75%. PhD program. For the past five years, we have set as a goal increasing the proportion of PhD students, believing that 15 is an appropriate number for a department of our size. Last year, with the prospect of 4 PhDs being awarded in the summer, we increased our recruitment efforts, placing an ad on the Linguist List (which includes a clearinghouse for graduate programs) and increasing our word-of-mouth presence at scholarly conferences. The result was a spike in applications, with 21 seeking admission for the current year. Of that group, 10 (or 43%) were admitted, of which five enrolled and one deferred admission for a year (50-60% yield). In addition, three outstanding students who completed their MAs in Spring 2009 applied for and were admitted to the PhD program. That puts our current PhD cohort at 11. A sign of the success of our recruitment efforts, as well as our recent graduates, is the unusually large number of inquiries into the program already for the coming academic year.

Criteria for selection. Because students often come without a background in linguistics, we rely heavily on GPA (graduate or undergraduate), the GRE scores (including the quantitative score), and on the statement of purpose. We do not admit any students with TOEFL scores below 600 (100 on the internet-based TOEFL), and we call all international applicants to whom we are considering making offers of financial assistance in order to assess their English proficiency.

Success in enrolling the highest quality students admitted. Linguistics consistently enrolls students of excellent quality whose GRE scores are higher than the average in both humanities/arts and the humanities/arts-other category nationally. From 1999-2007 the combined verbal and quantitative GREs of our students averaged more than 112 points higher than humanities nationally and 19 points higher than humanities/arts-other nationally, a result comparable to UI humanities programs as a whole. For the period 2000-2008, linguistics students’ GREs averaged over 46 points higher than those reported for all UI graduate programs. The current cohort of incoming students has average GREs of 595 verbal and 650 quantitative. The verbal scores of our students are generally lower than the average humanities program most years, reflecting the fact that a significant percentage of our graduate students are international students. Even those with very high TOEFL scores rarely have verbal GREs that reflect their actual abilities. On the whole, we are very pleased with the students that we have been able to attract to the program in recent years. Naturally, we cannot enroll each and every one of the top students we admit, but we get a reasonable
share. And we are proud of the caliber of students who do enroll and the level of their performance in the program and in the discipline at large.

**Success in enrolling a diverse student cohort.** We have always had success in enrolling a diverse student population. Because of the nature of our program, including its strong TESL curriculum, we have traditionally had a large number of international students. With the increased emphasis on funding PhD students, the percentage has decreased slightly, but not significantly. Of the 20 students currently enrolled, eight are international students, coming from China, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Kenya, Korea, and Russia. There is a healthy gender mix as well, with 8 female and 12 male students. In recent years we have not been successful in recruiting U.S. minority students. In the rare cases when minority students have been interested in our program, we have recruited them aggressively, but without success. In the past several minority students have received degrees from the Department.

**Financial aid commitments to incoming students.** In the majority of cases, students admitted to the PhD program receive ½-time aid, which is generally made up of teaching assistantships. In recent years there has been some funding for research assistantships through faculty grants, both external (e.g. NSF) and internal (e.g. AHI and SSFP). Students are assured of 5 years of aid provided they are making reasonable progress toward their degrees. We fund our most promising MA students with ¼-time appointments when possible, which they are assured of keeping provided they are making satisfactory academic progress.

**Program Characteristics**

The current size of our graduate program (9 MA, 11 PhD) is roughly appropriate for our current FTE (6.5 tenure track faculty, 1 (50%) lecturer in linguistics, and the Coordinator of the ESL Program, 5 permanent and 6 temporary ESL instructors, all of whom hold Adjunct Faculty appointments). With the current faculty, we are able to offer the courses required for our (80+) undergraduate majors, some of which also satisfy requirements for other majors (e.g. Communication Sciences and Disorders, English, Education, International Studies), an array of elective courses that serve our majors, GE courses in three areas, as well as graduate courses for our MA and PhD Programs. These graduate courses serve not only our graduate students, but a significant number of students from other programs, as described above. Our faculty members have expertise in Phonology, Phonetics, Syntax, Semantics, Second Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics, First Language Acquisition, and TESOL. Psycholinguistic expertise is available in the Departments of Psychology and Communication Sciences & Disorders. Our students benefit from courses offered in these other departments (including, but not limited to those that are cross-listed) and our faculty and students benefit from a considerable number of faculty in other units with common research interests. All of our tenure track faculty members are research active and hence able to mentor graduate students.

Although we have not been included in the NRC rankings, past reviews external committees have assessed our high quality, stating that “it [the Department] “represents a regional power in linguistics, comparable to places like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana” and “it prepares its students better”. A particular strength of the Department is our innovative blend of theoretical linguistics and theoretical and practical work in Second Language Acquisition and ESL. Over the years we have carefully crafted a well-integrated curriculum, the results of which are graduates of the highest caliber who bring unique qualifications to the academic marketplace. This has been a consistent theme in departmental reviews, as in the following from an external committee report: “It [the Department] continues to be a remarkable model of how the interrelationships among core linguistics, theory-driven SLA, Applied Linguistics, and…ESL can work to the benefit of all four.” And further, “The University of Iowa is virtually unique in putting all of this under one roof.” “From our perspective, Iowa can provide a model for other Linguistics Departments interested in ESL.” The positive results are acknowledged by a separate external review committee, “They [our graduates] are among the best ESL specialists coming out in this country.”

A weakness of the program is that we are currently not able to accept students who want to specialize in computational linguistics, which is a vibrant and fast growing specialization, because the faculty member who taught in this area left academia. We have arranged for a faculty member in another department to teach one course in this area, but he will retire at the end of this academic year. Additionally, without the ability to offer more courses and stable faculty mentoring, we are losing outstanding applicants. There is interest in the Departments of Computer Science, Psychology and Language Sciences and Disorders in hiring a computational linguist who could contribute to all four of our graduate programs. We have been working with members of these departments to develop a proposal for a new line that enhances the research and teaching in all of these programs as well as expanding the existing research collaborations.

Finally, in addition to reintroducing computational linguistics on campus, we consider 15 to be the ideal size of the PhD program and will continue to build toward that goal in order to optimize the educational and research missions of the Department and maximize our contribution to the College and University.