Second Language Acquisition
Strategic Assessment of Graduate Programs
September 15, 2009

Mission Statement
The mission of the interdisciplinary doctoral program in Second Language Acquisition is: (a) to provide rigorous and high-quality training in research, teaching, and leadership in higher education and related endeavors to future professionals in the field of second language acquisition; (b) to advance knowledge about language acquisition and language use from a variety of disciplinary perspectives; (c) to enhance the quality of the university by providing high-quality undergraduate language teaching and by facilitating scholarly communication and collaboration among faculty with different disciplinary traditions; and (d) to provide outreach support to the community, state, and beyond in relation to educational activities, social needs, and policy issues concerning language acquisition, language teaching and learning, and multilingualism.

The Second Language Acquisition program contributes to the educational mission of the University of Iowa by providing a graduate program that meets designated criteria for excellence and has national and international prominence; in possessing faculty who have achieved national and international distinction for teaching, scholarship, and service activities; in stimulating and coordinating interdisciplinary activities that are contributing to new knowledge in an emergent field and innovative practical applications; and in providing services to meet growing local, regional, and national needs in areas related to language and multilingualism.

Admissions Processes and Criteria
Since its inception in fall 2000, the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) program has attracted students from a wide range of countries, language backgrounds, and scholarly interests, which has resulted in a diverse yet collaborative intellectual community.

Student demand and recruitment. The SLA program grants only the Ph.D. degree. We recruit from M.A. programs at the University of Iowa, nationally, and internationally via our website, announcements in professional media, and word of mouth. Plans for the current admissions season include a promotional video (to be posted on the web) and program recruitment on internet listservs. Slightly over half of our current and former students (52%) hold a University of Iowa M.A. degree.

Criteria for selection. Criteria for admission include the M.A. degree in a related field (linguistics, language/literature, or foreign language education), a professional level of proficiency in English and the language of specialization for the program, and evidence of the ability to conduct original research in the field. The statement of purpose and sample of academic writing, along with the letters of recommendation, provide documentation of an applicant’s analytical abilities and focus on a research area for the Ph.D.

Enrollment success. We have been highly successful in attracting and enrolling high-quality students. Our approach to recruiting, which involves extensive personal communication with applicants and potential applicants by SLA faculty and students, has resulted in a high percentage of enrollment by accepted students. In the last six admissions cycles, we have admitted a total of 35 students, of whom 26 have enrolled (74%). Five of our current students (19%) hold the Presidential Graduate Fellowship, another sign of our ability to attract students of high quality.

Diverse student cohort. Given the interdisciplinary and multi-language character of our program, we attract a highly diverse group of students. We have a large percentage of international students, both applicants (77%) and entering students (78%), and of women, both applicants (66%) and entering students (96%). Our current students come from the United States, Austria, Chile, China, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, and Spain. Recent graduates include students from the United States, China, the Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, and Taiwan.

Financial aid commitments. Adequate and appropriate financial support is crucial to a successful graduate program. We are committed to supporting our students (with half-time assistantships or the equivalent) during the years that they take courses (2 or 3, depending on courses transferred from the M.A.) plus 2 years to complete the dissertation, for a total of up to 5 years per student. As an interdisciplinary program, SLA has no institutionalized sources of student support; however, we regularly receive funding from the Graduate College for research assistantships, and from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for teaching assistantships for SLA students in CLAS language departments. Our students also take an active role in
securing assistantships in other areas of the university. Current students work in the Department of Rhetoric Writing Center, International Programs, the Language Media Center, the Center for Teaching, and Information Technology Services.

**Program Outcomes**
Since opening its doors in fall 2000, the SLA program has enrolled 44 students, of whom 15 have graduated. Only 2 students have left the program. The remaining 27 are in good standing and are making progress towards their degrees.

Degree completion and time to degree. The median time to degree is 5.9 years, among the lowest of non-science programs. Coursework occupies 2–3 years, and students are urged to complete the dissertation in 2 years after completing their coursework and comprehensive exams. Our retention rate is extraordinarily high (95%).

Fellowships, awards, honors, publications. There are currently 27 doctoral students pursuing the SLA degree. One-third of them have been recipients of awards (some more than one award), including the Presidential Graduate Fellowship, the Ballard Seashore Dissertation Year Fellowship, the Graduate College Summer Fellowship, the T. Anne Cleary International Dissertation Research Fellowship, and the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (all UI fellowships). One has received a Dissertation Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and another received the Cheng & Tsui Professional Development Award, offered in conjunction with the Chinese Language Teachers Association. The students are remarkably dedicated, enthusiastic, and industrious. Several have organized conferences, and the SLA Student Association initiated an annual SLA Graduate Student Symposium with the SLA program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that the UI hosted in Spring 2009. See [http://international.uiowa.edu/centers/flare/current-students/publications.asp](http://international.uiowa.edu/centers/flare/current-students/publications.asp) for the list of refereed publications and conference presentations/posters by our students.

Graduate student placement. Desirable and expected placements for our students include faculty positions in language departments or professional positions in organizations that support language teaching and learning (e.g., study abroad programs, language media centers). In the less commonly taught languages, tenure-track faculty positions in second language acquisition are quite rare, and we expect that our graduates in those languages might start in non tenure-track positions and successfully compete for tenure-track positions at other institutions as those become available. Of the 15 graduates of our program, all are employed. Their positions are distributed as follows: 7 in tenure-track faculty positions (e.g., Texas Tech, Arizona State, Louisiana State, Clemson); 6 in non tenure-track faculty positions (e.g., Boston University, Princeton, Harvard, George Mason; all but one in Asian or African languages); 2 in other positions (language technology specialist at Davidson College, Chinese teacher at the secondary level). Although none has yet come up for tenure, they are establishing strong publication records as young scholars.

**Program Characteristics**

Program size, vitality, and standing. The SLA program is known inside and outside the UI for the excellence of our students, their active participation in research, and their collaboration and collegiality. The current cohort of 27 students meets our program goal, given the size of our faculty. The vitality of our program and the productivity of our students are reflected in their success in competing for fellowships and awards (see Program Outcomes above), as well as their publications and presentations at professional conferences. We are one of the oldest SLA doctoral programs in the CIC, and our reputation for excellence, although not yet documented in national rankings, is strong and widespread.

Faculty. We currently have 20 affiliated faculty members who offer courses for the SLA program, advise students, and/or serve on comprehensive, dissertation, and faculty governance committees. The interdisciplinary basis and wide range of academic units whose faculty contribute to our program can be seen in the number of academic units in which the SLA faculty hold their primary appointments:
- Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures: Chuanren Ke, Helen Shen (Chinese); Ikuko Yuasa (Japanese); Margaret Mills (Russian)
- Communication Sciences and Disorders: Richard Hurtig
- Communication Studies: Kristine Fitch
- German: Bruce Spencer
- Language Media Center: Sue Otto (also in Spanish & Portuguese)
- Linguistics: Jill Beckman, William Davies, Elena Gavruseva, Roumyana Slabakova (co-director)
- Psychological and Quantitative Foundations: Stephen Alessi, Kathy Schuh
- Rhetoric: Carol Severino
• Spanish and Portuguese: Paula Kempchinsky, Judith Liskin-Gasparro (co-director), Jason Rothman
• Teaching and Learning: Michael Everson, Leslie Schrier

Strengths and challenges

The many strengths of the program have already been presented. In this section we highlight the value of the interdisciplinary doctoral program in Second Language Acquisition to the University of Iowa.

• The program provides a source of intellectual vitality for faculty engaged in SLA, many of whom do not have opportunities to teach or mentor graduate courses in SLA.
• The program, in conjunction with the linguistics programs in other units on campus, has given the UI a strong reputation for second language studies.
• The program provides an option for doctoral study for excellent M.A. students in departments at the UI that do not have doctoral programs, or whose doctoral programs do not have an SLA focus. This increases the vitality of these programs, because they attract students with the potential to continue past the M.A. to doctoral work.
• Because of the interdisciplinary character of the program, our students draw on many resources across the UI, which in turn creates opportunities for faculty collaboration across departments and colleges.
• Our students, most of whom hold teaching assistantships in language departments, are excellent classroom teachers and have expertise in areas related to teaching, such as technology, assessment, and program supervision. They contribute in significant ways to undergraduate language education, and several of them have won TA Teaching Awards.
• We contribute to the internalization of the UI in several ways: by bringing high-quality international students to campus, by fostering student research outside the United States, and in other ways by participating in the international community of SLA scholars.

Challenges. The challenges we face stem from our status as an interdisciplinary program without its own faculty lines or a stable financial base. Faculty attrition in key areas has narrowed the scope of what we can offer to students. In 2008–2009 two key SLA faculty members passed away, and we have lost several more in the last three years to other institutions. The downside of being an interdisciplinary unit, rather than a department (or a department-like program), is that our needs are not considered by departments when establishing their hiring priorities. Because we have no faculty lines of our own, we cannot replace lost faculty or (in the best of situations) promote faculty growth.

Recommendations

The recent loss of active faculty members in key areas may, if not addressed soon, restrict our ability to continue to offer a high-quality program to our doctoral students. It is clear that we need a plan for providing faculty (or faculty lines) for the program. Although we are not able to decide how to implement structural changes to the SLA program to ensure its vitality and sustainability, we offer the following suggestions for what such a system of changes might include:

• The most immediate and crucial need is to increase the number of SLA affiliated faculty (by 1–2) through strategic hires of applied linguists in CLAS departments.
• We also recommend that a reward system be created for departments (especially in CLAS) that give high priority in their hiring plans to faculty who will participate in the SLA doctoral program. We recommend that a reward structure be created for departments whose current faculty actively participate in the SLA program.
• We need a stable source of funding for our students. The Graduate College and International Programs have been most generous in providing us with a budget for programming, and IP also provides us with an administrative home for FLARE (the parent unit of the SLA doctoral program). The Graduate College and CLAS have also provided us with RA and TA support on a year-by-year basis. But graduate assistantships for our students are precarious, especially in the current budgetary environment. A stable source of student funding would allow us to make offers earlier in the admissions season and attract the strongest applicants more consistently.

The Second Language Acquisition program has the potential to increase its national and international recognition and to bring significant prestige to the University of Iowa. With more reliable support for students and a strategy to replace faculty and, over time, increase faculty, we can become one of the University of Iowa’s best new doctoral programs.