

External Review of New Graduate Level Academic Programs

Review of the Language Teaching Studies (LTS) Program at the University of Oregon (Submitted January 20, 2017)

Introduction

We are pleased to submit this report about the Language Teaching Studies (LTS) Program at the University of Oregon. It is the aim of the current faculty and administration to change the status of this curriculum from that of a program track within the Linguistics MA to an MA in its own right. Thus, this particular review is an example of the following situation described in the guidelines we received: "The proposed program is closely related to an existing program (i.e., not a completely new area for the proposing institution)."

We are pleased to report from the outset that we are unanimously enthusiastic about the conversion of the current LTS program to MA-granting status. Our endorsement is based on an extensive review of documentation about the curriculum and the faculty; interviews with the Dean, the Department Chair, and other support staff; meetings with faculty members; meetings with students; and our own confidential deliberations.

This report will address the four key points determined by the review guidelines we were sent: (1) the program, (2) the faculty, (3) the need for the program, and (4) the resources required to offer this program successfully. In what follows we will address each of these issues in turn and then provide some concluding comments.

1. Program

- a. *The program objectives and requirements; the mechanisms for program administration and assessment.*

We see the program's objectives and requirements as appropriate and the mechanisms for program administration and assessment as being optimal. A comment arose in the data we were provided that sometimes the program seemed to lack coherence. By virtue of being an intensive program with numerous components, it is not surprising that students have some issues with its overall coordination. However, in our view, the program deserves accolades for how well it is coordinated, providing strong transitions, with one course building on another. In the marketing for the program, more could be done to make this impressive feature clear.

- b. *The program's alignment with the institution's mission and strategic objectives.*

We see the program as well aligned, and in terms of its topical coverage, the program is impressive. The University of Oregon's broad mission statement encompasses this LTS program.

- c. *The depth and breadth of coverage in terms of faculty availability and expertise, regular course offerings and directed study, and access to and use of support resources within and external to the institution.*

The program is strong in both depth and breadth relative to faculty, courses, and support resources outside the Linguistics Department. The student focus-group feedback was largely positive, with just a few red flags. One question is just how flexible the faculty are in catering to students' needs. For example, some students felt that they don't receive adequate feedback on their major projects. Whereas all LTS faculty reportedly review student proposals at the outset of the project work, there appeared to be a sense that the feedback to students on their work was uneven. So while it is clearly a strength of the program that project supervisors are not necessarily from the LTS faculty, it appeared that some of these faculty members do not necessarily provide the same amount and/or type of feedback. The Program Coordinator indicated that outside colleagues were not invited back if they do not abide by feedback standards. Separate feedback from Native American students was highly positive regarding their participation in the program, although some of them had some specific challenges that required them to take longer to complete the program (e.g., time devoted to strengthening their proficiency in their target languages, commitments to Native American communities, and funding issues).

- d. *The relationship of this program to undergraduate and other graduate programs at the institution and other institutions in the state, if appropriate. Consider collaborative arrangements, partnerships, interdisciplinary programs, service functions, joint research projects, support programs, etc.*

It is our understanding that there is no other broad language-teaching graduate degree in the state (i.e., this is not just a TESOL program). The current program provides the means to prepare students to teach diverse languages after undergraduate preparation in linguistics, indigenous studies, foreign languages, English, and K-12 teaching certification, among other areas. There are several important collaborating entities involved. Not surprisingly, courses offered by LTS Faculty are attractive to undergraduate students as well, which both increases and enriches the diversity of students on the one hand, but on the other increases the possibility that in some of the course offerings, the material is simplified somewhat in order to cater to the undergrads.

One graduate student pointed out that there are only three courses that are limited to graduate students. As a result, some of the graduate students do not feel that they are getting genuine, advanced graduate courses. However, some graduate students we met with see the presence of undergraduates in their classes as a plus, because the undergraduates are often quite knowledgeable about linguistics. Please note: When we checked with the SLT administrators we learned that 27 of the 60 credits are, in practice, for graduate students only, and additional internship or elective courses in other departments are often offered at the 600 level as well. Thus, this particular student's comment may reflect more of a perception than a reality.

In the case of indigenous languages, it is good to get the undergraduates more involved in indigenous issues, particularly since this community at the university is rather small. As a result, building the cohort of students who can support one another is an important goal as the program moves forward. Thus, there are pros and cons of having both undergraduate and graduate students in the same courses. As a committee we want to encourage the LTS faculty to continue to develop strategies for working with this diverse student population.

- e. *The justification in terms of state needs, demand, access, and cost effectiveness (if this program represents duplication within the state).*

The LTS program really appears to be offering something not found elsewhere in the state. This program addresses a distinctive state need relative to the provision of teachers of the languages of the nine tribes with reservations in the state as well as other Native American communities. The Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI) based at the University of Oregon is an important indigenous program, one of the very few in the country and the only one with a special focus on the Northwest and Plateau cultural regions, which include Washington, Northern California, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Montana. We wish to note that it serves a region with a particularly large Native American population with a diverse linguistic heritage and that its reach extends beyond the region as well.

- f. *The probable impact of the program on the department or academic unit, as well as its effect on current programs.*

We foresee no negative effects on the Linguistics Department or the academic unit itself as a result of giving full MA-granting status to the LTS Program. The statistics look impressive. The demands for enrollment are good. The issue of what to call the program for marketing purposes is one that could be examined. Different marketing strategies may be required for recruiting students from diverse backgrounds.

- g. *The program's major strengths and weaknesses.*

The review committee was impressed by the diversity of the course offerings and the flexibility of the faculty. For instance, we were delighted to see an entire course devoted to pragmatics. One member of our committee suggested that the topic of language learning strategies may not be getting much attention. It would be good to know that the developing teachers (i.e., the MA candidates) are well versed in how to conduct strategy instruction in their own language classrooms. Furthermore, as noted above, the LTS program is one of the few graduate programs anywhere that includes a pathway for preparing teachers of Native American languages.

2. Faculty

- a. *The quality of the faculty in terms of training, experience, research, scholarly contributions, ability to generate external support, stature in the field, and qualifications to serve as graduate faculty.*

We were very impressed with the quality and the diversity of the LTS faculty. While the majority of the faculty members are relatively young, some of them have particularly impressive credentials. They certainly provide good coverage of course material. All in all, as a review committee we believe that the faculty are appropriate for the nature of the program.

- b. *The faculty in terms of size, qualifications for area(s) of specialization offered, and the student body served. Include analysis of program sustainability in light of such factors as upcoming retirements, etc.*

As is the case in many MA programs for language teachers, there is always the issue of whether LTS students have signed up to be taught by theoretical linguists. The balance between theory and practice is an age-old problem in our field. It appears that at present while there are courses offered in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean pedagogical grammar, but students said there is no comparable course offered on English grammar. Actually, the program administrators confirmed that there is a course available – LING 594 – the English Grammar class, and that a course on pedagogical grammar has been offered four times in the past eight years (though not in the last two years, which may explain the students' perception).

- c. *Areas of faculty strength and weakness.*

We feel that there are broad areas of strength among the current faculty. The faculty members are very sensitive to the diverse interests and needs of the enrolled students – interests and needs that derive from the highly diverse languages that they seek to teach and the diverse settings in which they plan to teach. It would appear from a perusal of the faculty CVs and from discussion with the graduate students that the faculty members are all solid contributors to the program. Kudos to the University of Oregon for making this situation possible.

- d. *Faculty workload, including availability for student advising, research oversight, mentoring, and teaching effectiveness.*

While we weren't given access to course evaluations to corroborate our impressions, it would appear that courses are being taught well and are well received, which is an important criterion in a program focused on instruction and not on research. We did not hear complaints from faculty as to their being overworked, so the workload would seem to be appropriate. If anything, the Program Director seems to have a huge amount of work on her plate and to be handling it well.

- e. *The credentials, involvement of, and reliance upon support faculty from other departments within the institution, from other institutions, and/or adjunct faculty.*

The program is functioning well and is not overly reliant on faculty from other departments. In fact, we were pleased to see evidence of inter-departmental cooperation for the benefit of the students. For example, those LTS candidate who plan to teach Japanese, Korean, or Chinese can take a course on Japanese, Chinese, Korean pedagogical grammar. Likewise, as noted above, the presence of NILI on the campus and the close association of the LTS program with that organization is a definite plus.

The relationship of the LTS to NILI can serve as a model for other OU programs (e.g., teacher education, applied social and environmental sciences, etc.) seeking to strengthen their inclusion of Native American students and their preparation of students for Native American community-specific workforce needs. The Native American LTS students we met unanimously lauded the opportunities provided in the program through the partnership with NILI.

3. Need

- a. *The evidence that there is significant demand for this program.*

The members of the review committee agree that there is a clear need for this program to be offered as an MA degree granting program. We did not see, for example, any duplication between this LTS program and programs offered in the School of Education. While the School of Education puts its emphasis on pedagogy, LTS focuses first and foremost on language, as its graduate students tend to have prior education and experience in pedagogy. One student did mention that she is pursuing a credential in the teaching of Chinese through the School of Education. If this career track appears to be a viable possibility for a number of students, the faculty could explore avenues towards credentialing.

- b. *The evidence of sufficient and relevant employment opportunities for graduates of this program.*

Despite fact that that the job market for language teacher in the United States is tight, the LTS graduates are finding jobs, both in the US and overseas. All the Native American language-focused students indicated that there was a strong demand for Native American language teachers in Oregon and the region, and that the challenge was preparing enough teachers to meet the demand.

- c. *The overall need for the program within the institution, the Oregon University System, state and/or region, and nation.*

The review committee members agree that there is a strong need for this program to be elevated to the status of offering an MA degree. Recent demographical data show that students are coming from other countries and other states in order to enroll in this program. LTS provides a distinctive resource to the reservation communities and general Native American population of Oregon. Census figures show that the Native American population of the country, region, and state is growing more rapidly than the general population. This population growth is accompanied by growing interest in incorporating the teaching of Native American languages and cultures into Native American community schools. National research on the effects of Native American language and culture study on increasing overall academic success of at-risk Native American students is creating additional demand.

4. Resources

- a. *The adequacy of library, computer, laboratory, and other research facilities and equipment; offices; classrooms; support services for the program; and, if relevant, the program's utilization of resources outside the institution (e.g., field sites, laboratories, museums, libraries, and cooperative arrangements with other institutions).*

Both the physical resources (classrooms, libraries, meeting rooms, study spaces, etc.) and the support systems are impressive. Students repeatedly remarked on the helpfulness of the faculty and the administration, often citing Keli Yerian's strengths as an administrator. There are many opportunities for social interaction with other students and with faculty members. The students are appreciative of OU institutions such as NILI and CASLS (the Center for Applied Language Studies). The resources of NILI could be strengthened to better serve the LTS and other programs affiliated with NILI. Native American students remarked that at present there is but a single full-time professor assigned to NILI. (Actually, the Director of NILI, Dr. Janne Underriner, is not a member of the tenure-track faculty.) The students felt that at least one more full-time professor and one more full-time academic advisor could strengthen LTS and the other programs to which NILI is providing outreach. Additional NILI faculty could result in strengthening LTS to include attention to areas of teaching where Native American language teachers have unique needs – e.g., conceptualizing a second language teaching framework for an endangered language never taught as a second language, designing multigenerational second language teaching systems within the contexts of at-risk communities, developing curricula and teaching materials from the ground up, strategies for strengthening teacher proficiency in endangered languages with limited speaker resources, etc.

- b. *The proposed budget and any need for new resources to operate the program effectively. Where appropriate, review resources available to support graduate students (e.g., fellowships and other scholarships, teaching and research assistantships).*

We see no negative impact on the budget, as this is a continuing program rather than a new one. Some of students have received LTS support and it was a factor in their choice of this program. Such support might be expanded for students being prepared to teach within Oregon especially in communities of at-risk students. We believe that as the LTS program begins granting MA degrees, there will be more applicants, and hence potentially more tuition revenue.

- c. *In terms of national standards, the institution's commitment to the program as demonstrated by the number of faculty relative to workload and student numbers, support for faculty by nonacademic personnel (e.g., support, staff, technicians), financial support for students, and funds for faculty research and professional activities (e.g., conferences, visiting lectures).*

The CVs we were sent demonstrate the breadth, diversity, and depth of the faculty members' interests and expertise. The University of Oregon is fortunate to have the SLT faculty they have.

- d. *The institution leaders' commitment to this program in the long term.*

The Dean and the Head of Linguistics are solidly behind the program. The faculty members are enthusiastic, and the students are eager to proceed. We see no impediments to changing the LTS program to an MA-granting operation. The commitment of the Linguistics Department to the distinctive needs of the relatively small population of Native American students is very impressive. Some of that support (e.g., distinctive pathways for determining student skills in, and commitment to, their language of focus, opportunities to substitute some courses, etc.) has been done informally and might be made more explicit and publicized in a Native American student targeted brochure or website. Explicit clarification of flexibility and attention to distinctive student populations in program materials and targeted marketing to those distinctive populations would publicize the commitment that clearly exists.

- e. *The institution's ability to sustain the program in the foreseeable future along with its current and future projected commitments.*

With this youthful and energetic program faculty and a marketing push to sustain and enhance the program, the LTS MA will be an even greater benefit to the university than the program currently is.

Concluding Comments

The review committee is unanimous in its recommendation that the LTS program be converted to an MA-granting degree. The program is highly distinctive and serves a diverse range of students and needs, including needs unique to Oregon and surrounding states. At present the program is a hidden gem. This slight restructuring would make it more visible, both nationally and internationally. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or concerns about this enthusiastic endorsement.

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