

A University of Distinction

In the Department of Linguistics, the learning objectives for programs in general education are as follows:

- (1) Misconceptions about language are addressed; students must understand the significance of the following:
 - (a) All normal children, regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, social, or economic heritage, can learn any human language as their native language.
 - (b) No language or dialect is inherently superior to any other.
- (2) Students must appreciate the nature of linguistic and cultural diversity:
 - (a) The differences among languages are not biologically based.
 - (b) Despite superficial differences, all languages and dialects share universal characteristics.
 - (c) There are limits to the ways that languages can differ from each other.
- (3) Students must understand that the structure of language is not arbitrary; they must demonstrate an awareness of linguistic principles in one or more of the core areas of linguistics (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and language change).

The assessment instrument measuring how well these objectives are met is a test given in all sections on the first day of classes and again just before the final exam. The test consists of 25 true/false questions scored by scantron. Since we began using this instrument, over 6500 students in ALS 176 have taken the pretest-posttest series, and the results have been remarkably consistent. For many years, the average on the pretest was never been better than chance; on the posttest, most students scored about 25% higher.

For this year's assessment report, which covered the period from fall 2001 to winter 2003, a disturbing pattern emerged which we had not seen before. In particular, the figures for the improvement on the posttest over the pretest varied much more from section to section than they had in the past. The most significant factor was whether the instructor is a member of the full-time faculty or not.

For full-time faculty, the average improvement in scores from pretest to posttest was 24.52% for the 4 semester period. For part-time and visiting faculty, the average improvement was 8.92%. This is a very significant difference (15.6%). During the period examined, 1089 students took the pretest and 856 students took the posttest, which is a 78.6% response rate; fifteen sections were offered, 5 taught by full-time faculty and 10 taught by part-time and visiting faculty.

During the same period, the full-time faculty also taught 7 out of 8 sections of other general education courses; thus, overall, the full-time faculty taught 12 out of 23 sections of general education courses. Data from the other general education courses (LIN 180, LIN 181, and LIN 182) is not included here because they are new and the assessment instruments are still in development. ALS 176, on the other hand, is a course with a long and well-documented history; during the 1990's, nearly 9000 students took it, primarily to satisfy the language requirement.

All faculty in Linguistics, including part-time and visiting faculty, are aware of our learning objectives. The kinds of questions that appear on the assessment instrument for ALS 176 are broad based, dealing with very general linguistic concepts, which all instructors might be expected to cover. Certainly, all the books approved for the course cover the concepts. In short, if an instructor is effective in communicating the fundamental principles of the discipline, then students should be able to perform fairly well on the posttest after a 14 week course.

A careful examination of the data, reveals clearly that there is much greater uniformity in the teaching of full-time faculty than visiting and part-time faculty, at least as measured by student improvement between pretest and posttest. That finding correlates generally with the evaluations faculty receive: full-time faculty have more consistent and favorable evaluations than visiting and part-time faculty. As enrollments and pressure to offer general education sections have increased and the number of full-time faculty has decreased, the Linguistics Department has had to rely more on visiting and part-time faculty than in the past. Unfortunately, we have been unable to maintain the same visitors and part-timers over successive years, especially in the last three years. It seems fairly clear that this turnover is having a negative impact on general education.

None of the above should be interpreted as a criticism of part-time and visiting faculty themselves, who are often unsung heroes, working very diligently in often large classes for a very low salary. There are a variety of factors that could account for the decline in student performance noted above. Part-time and visiting faculty are not as familiar with the student body and the academic culture at Oakland University as full-time faculty. They frequently are hired on very short notice, and often have only a brief time to put together a syllabus. Sometimes, the book used in the course is not of their choosing, nor the time slot, nor the general schedule they have to follow. In addition, some students appear to be prejudiced against part-time and visiting faculty, judging them harshly and sometimes questioning their qualifications. Under such conditions, one naturally would expect better results from experienced, full-time faculty.

To achieve our goal of becoming a university of distinction by 2010, we need to do a better job in general education. Currently, there are 31 undergraduate majors in Linguistics and a dozen more graduate students seeking the MA. Linguistics is responsible for implementing and monitoring the English Proficiency Policy on campus, coordinating all ESL efforts, and teaching all ESL classes. We run the Hispanic Outreach Program and will soon begin an ESL Endorsement Program to teacher certification. We do this with 5 full-time faculty members including the Chair, two associated faculty members, and several part-timers. Since full-time faculty already teach at least half of all general education sections, it is unreasonable to expect them to teach more and, at the same time, maintain our various programs at a high level of quality.

A university of distinction has degree programs of distinction, and distinctive degree programs have qualified research faculty teaching the upper-division courses in the discipline. The more than 50 majors, minors and concentrators enrolled in the various undergraduate and graduate programs in Linguistics expect instructors of distinction in the core courses required for their degrees. Similarly, students in the general education program are entitled to instructors who are comparable to full-time faculty. True, these are hard times, and there are no quick solutions to the economic pressures that we face. One thing, however, does seem certain: we cannot be a university of distinction if the number of full-time faculty continues to dwindle.