Final Report
Academic Program Review
Department of Popular Culture

Review Process

The Department of Popular Culture prepared a self-study following program review guidelines. An external review committee, comprised of two faculty from other institutions, visited the campus, reviewed the self-study and interviewed department personnel, students, and University administrators. The Program Review Committee (PRC) reviewed the self-study and external report, and discussed the Popular Culture department with the Chair and the Dean of Arts & Sciences. This document reflects the PRC’s findings and recommendations.

Self-Study

Overview

In 1973, the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University became the first academic department in the world devoted solely to the study of popular culture and the only university to offer an undergraduate major and master’s degree in the field. Since that time, the department has achieved international recognition as a leader in this rapidly growing field of scholarship.

Currently, the department offers an undergraduate major designed to provide students with the skills and knowledge enabling them to pursue graduate work or employment in public sector institutions (such as museums) or in the entertainment and culture industries. The department also serves a large number of undergraduate students in Popular Culture courses that satisfy either General Education requirements or College of Arts and Sciences degree requirements. The MA program provides rigorous academic training for students entering doctoral programs or seeking employment in the private and public sectors. The Department is a major contributor to the Ph.D. program in American Culture Studies (ACS), where many students concentrate in Popular Culture.

Faculty and Staff

The department currently has eight tenured or tenure-track faculty, including three professors, two associate professors and three assistant professors. In addition, other instructors teach courses in the department as needed; these include full- and part-time instructors and the current head of the Popular Culture
Library, who has faculty status in the department. One of the department faculty serves as undergraduate advisor.

Currently, the department has 13 graduate assistants funded by the department’s graduate stipend allocation, one of whom is assigned to assist with the editing of the *Journal of American Folklore*. The others serve as discussion leaders and independent instructors for introductory Popular Culture courses. One of the graduate students is a doctoral student in ACS, and the rest are MA students in Popular Culture. Two additional graduate students are assigned by ACS to the Popular Culture department.

The department has one full-time secretary who is assisted by one part-time work/study student.

**Students**

Currently, the department has 34 Popular Culture majors and approximately 20 minors, reflecting a relatively steady increase since the mid-1990s. The number of male and female students is approximately equal, with about 5% designated minorities. Quality of students, based on high school GPA and ACT scores, is good and appears to represent a cross-section of the BGSU undergraduate student population.

The number of Popular Culture MA students has ranged from a high of 28 in 1995 to a low of 13 in fall of 1999. The decrease in students is a result of changes in admission policies, an increase in the size of stipends and a corresponding decrease in the number of stipends offered. Students are drawn from across the United States and from other nations.

In addition to its own majors/minors and MA students, the department coordinates course offerings with other departments and, most notably, participates in the ACS doctoral program. ACS students are required to take 18 hours of coursework in a declared concentration and many select Popular Culture. The Department of Popular Culture faculty direct dissertations and serve on dissertation committees for these students. Currently, there are 18 doctoral students in ACS with a declared concentration in Popular Culture and the 5 eligible faculty are directing 11 on-going doctoral dissertations. Faculty in the department, including the Popular Culture Librarian, also serve on preliminary exam committees for most of these graduate students. Despite Popular Culture’s involvement with the students in the ACS program, the faculty has no control over the admissions process or criteria.

**Facilities**

The office facilities of Popular Culture faculty and staff (located on the corner of College and Wooster streets) have deteriorated dramatically over the last decade and at this point they are inadequate and almost uninhabitable. Repairs have been made recently to take care of urgent problems; more complete renovation of the building is scheduled.
Most department classes are offered in Olscamp Hall to take advantage of media-equipped classrooms. All faculty have computers; in addition, one computer is provided for the staff. While this equipment is generally deemed adequate, the unreliability of the computer system on campus has discouraged faculty from using computers for instructional purposes. In addition, it should be noted that the department’s access to media production equipment is through the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology.

**Resources**

The self-study reports that: (1) during each year of the review period, the average total direct instructional expenditures, both personnel and operating per SCH in the College of Arts and Sciences and the University as a whole are 50% higher than the total direct instructional expenditure per SCH in the Department of Popular Culture; (2) the department operating budget has remained $18,285 since 1996 with additional funds transferred to the operating budget for specific purposes such as partial reimbursement for recruitment and travel; (3) during the latter part of the review period, the department operated at a deficit each year; and (4) a restricted BGSU Foundation account, the Ray and Pat Browne Endowment Fund, is available to support specified activities such as lectures and conferences.

**Teaching Loads and Scholarly Productivity**

Since 1993, faculty have generated between 469-571 SCH per FTE faculty, annually. The self-study did not mention whether the department has a differential teaching load policy or how equitable workload among faculty is achieved. It is also notable that the department faculty are often on advisory boards in Film Studies, Canadian Studies, International Studies, Africana Studies and Women’s Studies.

All faculty in the department are active in research and publication, with the department averaging more than one publication per faculty member per year. Publications of faculty in the department are varied, including books, scholarly articles and edited volumes of scholarly articles. Given that the department has a national reputation in the study of popular culture, the self-study suggests that publications on theoretical issues could be more numerous. Acquisition of external funding in the department has been limited, although the opportunity for external dollars may be less in this area relative to other disciplines in the University. Credentials of new hires in the department are strong; two of the tenured faculty are learning new languages to facilitate research in international popular culture.

**Undergraduate Program**

During the review period, the department undertook a number of curriculum revisions to strengthen the undergraduate program. Faculty are making sincere efforts to provide an international perspective to the program, as well as considering ways to better incorporate an ethnographic focus into undergraduate classes. Students are encouraged to participate in internships and the undergraduate advisor assists in locating and arranging them. Students hold internships at various sites, including museums, theme parks, radio stations and the
Library of Congress. In addition to other awards, last year a Popular Culture undergraduate student received the BGSU Distinguished Undergraduate Research Award.

The self-study identified a number of weaknesses in the current program. Among these are: (1) small number of tenured or tenure track faculty; (2) lack of career preparation for students intending to enter the workforce in business and non-profit organizations; (3) inadequate resources for instructional materials, including videotapes; (4) inadequate alumni database; and (5) the presence of a number of upper-level courses that satisfy College humanities requirements but that lack the appropriate prerequisites.

The department offers General Education courses that enroll large numbers of students each semester and are often taught by graduate students.

**Master’s Degree Program**

The master’s program enrolls strong students from a variety of undergraduate institutions. Many of these students are placed in excellent doctoral programs upon graduation. Those seeking employment have been successful in finding positions in a diverse range of occupations related to popular culture. The vast majority of students complete the program in two years; 88% of all students who enrolled in the MA program since 1992 have completed the degree or are actively completing degree requirements within the time limit, and nearly 80% of all students who first enrolled during this period have already earned the degree.

Weaknesses of the master’s program that were identified in the self-study are similar to those in the undergraduate program with respect to the lack of a good alumni database, few faculty (especially in some areas), and lack of career preparation for those students choosing not to enter doctoral programs. In addition, given the faculty size and competing demands of undergraduate and graduate courses, the department finds it difficult to maintain the diverse course offerings necessary to deliver a strong graduate program. As a result, the number of sections of graduate courses offered has declined during the last few years.

**Assessment**

At the undergraduate level, the department has identified learning outcomes and has used several methods of assessment. To assess the undergraduate major and minor, faculty regularly visit the capstone course to discuss students’ career plans and observe research paper presentations. In addition, the undergraduate advisor reads student evaluations, discusses students’ mastery of learning outcomes with faculty, meets informally with students to discuss their perceptions of the program, and meets with internship supervisors. As a result of this process, the department has identified and made several changes in courses and curriculum.

The primary assessment method in the master’s program is the comprehensive exam required of all students. This is supplemented with other activities on an ad hoc basis. While assessment of student performance based on the
exam suggested no change was necessary, other indicators identified needed changes that the department has undertaken.

Goals

The department articulates a number of goals for the next seven year planning period and has a detailed timeline outlining specific strategies to achieve these goals. Foremost among them is the desire to (1) maintain a leadership position in the field by establishing a Ph.D. program in Popular Culture and maintaining the visibility of the department. Additional objectives include an intent to: (2) develop a learning community for the academic study of popular culture; (3) revise the undergraduate curriculum and enhance the graduate program to better prepare students for successful careers; (4) enhance the liberal education of BGSU undergraduate students through mentoring of new instructors and assessing and revising general education courses; (5) develop departmental level research objectives, including the integration of cultural theory with the examination of specific examples of popular culture and establishing collaborative research projects; (6) encourage scholarship on popular culture by promoting access to the Popular Culture Library and sound Recording Archives at BGSU; and (7) to make popular culture research available to public audiences.

Within the framework of these goals, the self-study identifies specific priorities that require University support. These include: faculty salary adjustment; operating budget increase; new faculty positions (to meet current needs, a position in Applied and Entrepreneurial Popular Culture and a second position in Transformational Media Technologies are requested; future requests include positions in Popular Music and Popular Literature); three additional graduate assistantships; a second departmental secretary; a media lab; a media lab technician; and a new office and classroom building.

External Review Findings

The external review team recognized the unique position of the Department of Popular Culture as the only academic department in the world dedicated to the study of popular culture, and the historical contribution of the faculty in the department on legitimizing the field as an important area of study. The team believes BGSU has an important incentive to invest in the department to allow it to take advantage of its “brand name equity” and maintain its leadership position among an increasing number of competitors at a variety of institutions.

The external review team believes that the impressive new hires in Popular Culture have resulted in an appropriate blend of junior and senior faculty who are capable of developing distinctive epistemological, curricular and pedagogical approaches to the field in a department that already has a strong publication record. In addition, the team was impressed with the strong relationships that exist between Popular Culture and other units (including Ethnic Studies, History, Telecommunications, Women’s Studies, Theatre and Film Studies) as well as the overall quality of the undergraduate and graduate programs.
As a result, the external review team recommended that BGSU take immediate action to take advantage of the unique opportunities facing the department. Specific recommendations include the following:

1. The team recommended the department be authorized to hire three new faculty: a senior specialist in popular culture who can provide leadership and serve as department chair, a junior faculty member in transnational migration and cultural change, and a junior faculty in entrepreneurial culture and new media. They suggested these hires are critical to the department’s ability to retain faculty and competitively recruit students. The team also noted that it is important that these hires be made with the objective of increasing the cohesiveness of the department.

2. Recognizing that no small interdisciplinary department can do everything, the team recommended that the department decide on and clearly articulate the common core that holds it together. This core, which should embrace a problem-centered as opposed to an object-centered approach, should then direct requests for future positions, curriculum, pedagogy and collaborative research.

3. The external review team recommended that the Department of Popular Culture have its own Ph.D. program; if that was not feasible, the team recommended that, at a minimum, the faculty of the Department of Popular Culture have full control over the admission, evaluation and certification of American Culture Studies students specializing in popular culture.

4. The external review team was not necessarily in favor of forming a School of Cultural Studies. However, they did recommend that the administration investigate ways to encourage cross-campus/cross-disciplinary endeavors, such as providing departments with funds to buy out faculty from courses in their home departments when teaching in other departments. The team believed it was important for the Department of Popular Culture to draw on the resources of faculty in other departments in the form of team teaching and curricular innovation and recognized that this would be possible only if the other units were not deprived of faculty resources as a result.

5. The external review team recommended that the senior hire be in charge of supervising the coordination of popular culture resources on campus including the Popular Culture Library, the Popular Press, the two well known journals and the large professional organization. They suggested that the faculty line that now supports the director of the Popular Press be returned to the department at the time that the current director retires.

6. The team recognized that the renovations to the popular culture building will alleviate some of the existing problems, but it did not believe renovation can accommodate the long-run growth of the department. Subsequently, they recommended that action be taken now to begin the planning of a new facility that can house faculty and students, provide some classroom facilities with necessary media capabilities and perhaps include the library collections. They further recommended that the University consider such a site for a large
“naming” gift and that this may include a museum devoted to popular culture.

7. The external review team agreed with the department that faculty salaries are low. However, they recommended that immediate attention be given to increasing funding for supplies and technical support services.

In conclusion, the external review team argued that the Department of Popular Culture needs the resources to capitalize on its reputation and “equity” or risk squandering what has been built up over the last 30 years. They suggested that the cost of inaction now will be tremendous in terms of lost opportunities. This is clearly an area in which the external review team believes the University should invest.

Program Review Committee Findings

The PRC concurs with many of the findings of the external review team. The Department of Popular Culture is a small department that has a national presence. Faculty productivity is good; faculty have enthusiasm and commitment to their teaching and research endeavors. The PRC recognizes the leadership role of the department in the field of popular culture and also is cognizant of the growing competition in this area from a number of other institutions that have considerably better funding and threaten to displace the position of the department on the national scene. The PRC believes it is important that BGSU recognize the role of the Department of Popular Culture in creating a premier learning institution and the tremendous resources that already exist at the University in this field. Whereas our usual protocol is to recommend that departments make substantive progress on specific issues as a prerequisite condition for additional University support, the PRC finds that the Department of Popular Culture has a consistent history of high performance at all levels of teaching and in research and publication. Thus, the PRC finds that investment in this department would be wise; we feel BGSU should provide the resources necessary to maintain Popular Culture’s leadership position and strengthen its national reputation.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in order for the department to grow in ways that will ensure its prominence.

Ph.D. in Popular Culture. The external team recommended that the University invest in a Ph.D. program in Popular Culture. However, the PRC finds that the University cannot support another Ph.D. program, particularly given the already existing, and clearly related, program in American Culture Studies. There is also concern regarding the impact on the ACS Ph.D. program if a separate Ph.D. program in Popular Culture were to be implemented. The PRC finds that the needs of the Department of Popular Culture can be met through greater cooperation with the ACS program, as will be described in the Recommendations.

Graduate enrollments in the Popular Culture MA program have declined 43.1% since 1997. Improving graduate enrollments in Popular Culture, generally, must be considered as part of the process of restructuring the Ph.D. in ACS.
Relationship with American Culture Studies. The PRC is sympathetic to the situation facing the faculty in Popular Culture with respect to the American Culture Studies Ph.D. Despite some differences of opinion as to the actual number, it is clear that many Ph.D. students in ACS specialize in Popular Culture and perhaps enter the Ph.D. program as a result of the reputation and faculty in Popular Culture. The faculty in Popular Culture are expected to chair dissertation committees, offer coursework and otherwise provide support and guidance to these students, and yet have no voice or control over admission and evaluation of these students. The PRC finds this situation is not in the best interest of the Department of Popular Culture, the interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in ACS, or the students involved in the program.

Faculty. It appears to the PRC that the faculty in Popular Culture are “spread too thin” by demands for offering general education courses, offering a full range of courses for master’s students and faculty’s extensive involvement with the ACS Ph.D. program. As a result, the department is requesting additional faculty lines and the external review team concurs that the department is in need of additional faculty resources. The PRC concurs that additional faculty are needed if the department has any chance of maintaining its national position in light of growing competition. The PRC is not convinced that a senior faculty is needed to serve as department chair and provide leadership if existing faculty are willing to continue or take on this role. Some of the external report’s personnel recommendations assumed a connection between the Popular Press and the Department. The PRC understands that the Popular Press is independent of the department. However, the department could gain by addressing the connection that others perceive; we encourage the department and the University to initiate discussions of gaining control of the Press. In sum, the position requests described in the self-study need to be reconsidered and put in the context of other changes taking place in the department.

Vision. The external review team believes that the department needs to assess where the field of popular culture is going. They were concerned that the department should capitalize on its past and its visibility to define the agenda for themselves as leaders in the field. The external team argued that there was much to be gained from a rigorous consideration of the intellectual themes that define the field: “…the department needs to move from an object-oriented confederation of separate research interests to a more problem-centered sense of a shared project that articulates clearly the specific concerns, expertise, and interests of this department.” The PRC is persuaded of the importance of these comments. The accomplishments and consistent productivity of the department is laudable, but not necessarily “enough” to maintain its reputation. What “more” is needed is creative thinking about how the study of popular culture fits in the larger context of culture studies. The department’s efforts in this vein will then have implications with respect to hiring decisions, the curriculum and the maintenance of other popular culture resources that are not in the direct control of the department such as the Popular Culture Library holdings.

Career Training. The department suggests there is a need for a new faculty
member in the area of Applied and Entrepreneurial Popular Culture in order to provide students with career-related skills to better prepare them for professional positions in business and non-profit organizations. The PRC questions whether this is the best use of a faculty line in the Department of Popular Culture. Perhaps some cooperative endeavors with the College of Business or with the Career Services Office could be designed to fulfill the career needs of the Popular Culture students without committing a faculty line, which may better be designated elsewhere.

School of Cultural Studies. Although the PRC considered the possibility of a School of Cultural Studies at BGSU, there does not seem to be support for such a structure nor do we believe it is necessary. What is necessary, however, is that the terms for interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration be revised.

Facilities. The PRC concurs with the findings of the external review team that while the renovations of the building housing the Popular Culture faculty is a positive short-term solution to the dismal physical facilities in which the faculty work, it is not a long-term solution that will allow this area to grow.

Salaries and Operating Budget. As with many areas across campus, the PRC recognizes the need for greater instructional and technical support for this unit. The evidence available suggested that faculty salaries are relatively low compared to national norms.

Assessment. The PRC commends the department for its recent curriculum modifications and its assessment activities to date, but believe that these need to be more formalized and expanded, particularly at the undergraduate level.

Program Review Committee Recommendations

Given these findings, the PRC offers the following recommendations and time lines designed to help the Department of Popular Culture grow and maintain its national prominence.

1) The PRC recommends that the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences appoint a committee to investigate the feasibility of redesigning the ACS Ph.D. program. While the number of faculty on the committee is left to the discretion of the Dean, the PRC believes it is critical that there be equal representation of faculty from Popular Culture and ACS, and that a spirit of cooperation and collaboration is demonstrated. The committee should be charged with restructuring the program such that students would receive a degree in Culture Studies and would have the option of concentrating in one of two tracks: either Popular Culture or American Culture Studies. It is further recommended that:

a) This committee be charged with developing policy and procedures that would give the faculty in Popular Culture control over admission and evaluation standards of students intending to concentrate in Popular Culture.

b) The committee report to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences with
specific recommendations for restructuring the program no later than March of 2001.

c) If a workable program and plans for implementation are not completed to the satisfaction of the Chair of the Department of Popular Culture, the Director of the ACS Program, the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, and the Graduate Dean, we recommend that the Graduate Dean suspend admission to the ACS Ph.D. program.

d) Assuming that the committee’s proposal is acceptable to all relevant parties and collaboration is demonstrated, we recommend that the new program be implemented and that the Department of Popular Culture be given an additional faculty member to facilitate implementation, as described in recommendation 3.

2) The PRC recommends that the faculty in the Department of Popular Culture engage in the dialogue suggested by the external review team, as summarized briefly in the Finding on “Vision”, above. The challenge is to identify the common questions that bring coherence to the diverse research interests represented in the department. In undertaking this discussion, the Department of Popular Culture can provide leadership and direction not just for themselves, but can define their niche within the broader context of culture studies. As part of this discussion, it is imperative that the faculty decide whether a senior faculty member is necessary to provide leadership and serve as department chair, center director and coordinator of University resources in Popular Culture. This discussion should take place during academic year 2000-01, with a report to be filed with the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences in time for personnel requests in spring. If the report is productive and visionary, the PRC then recommends the Dean give careful consideration to the request for new faculty lines, as described in recommendation 3.

3) Provided that adequate progress has been made on restructuring the ACS Ph.D. program (recommendation 1) and on identifying a focus for the department within the broader context of culture studies (recommendation 2), the PRC supports the self-study’s request for some additional lines. However, the exact nature of the lines must be reformulated in the context of greater participation in and responsibility to the ACS Ph.D. and in light of a revised vision. The department should submit its revised requests to the Dean of A&S within the context of these other changes.

4) The PRC recommends that the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences form a task force charged with developing a plan to increase interdepartmental collaboration and cooperation. It is imperative that this task force address the issue of how to make faculty available for interdisciplinary programs and other department initiatives without putting the faculty member’s home department at a disadvantage. The task force’s recommendation should be submitted to the Dean by the end of Spring Semester, 2001.

5) The PRC recommends that the Department of Popular Culture investigate ways
to better prepare students for positions in business and non-profit organizations related to Popular Culture utilizing resources available within other units across campus.

6) The PRC believes it is important that the Department of Popular Culture and the ACS Program be housed physically close to one another. Given this and the current dismal state of the Popular Culture building, the PRC recommends that the administration:

a) Investigate alternative space to house the two units in close proximity.

b) Investigate the feasibility of obtaining the capital necessary to build a new facility to house the Department of Popular Culture, the Popular Culture Library, the ACS Program, and technically-equipped classrooms. We further recommend that the Development Office be engaged in this to ascertain whether there is a possibility of seeking a major gift donor as suggested by the external review team.

7) If it does not currently have a differential teaching load system, the Chair in consultation with the Dean should devise one during the fall semester, 2000. This system should be designed to create equitable workloads, take into account that workload typically changes throughout a career, protect the career development needs of the faculty with reference to criteria for promotion and tenure, encourage only those service activities that are in the best interests of the department and University, and make efficient use of the department’s personnel resources. The new system should be implemented beginning in the fall semester, 2001.

8) The PRC recommends that the Department of Popular Culture implement at least one new assessment activity for the undergraduate major by the end of Spring Semester, 2001, and that a new assessment activity for the master’s program be implemented by the end of Spring Semester, 2002. The Department of Popular Culture should engage in assessment of all its programs as part of its regular functioning. Assessment reports should be made yearly to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences and the Vice Provost for Academic Programs. The Department of Popular Culture should report annually to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, with a copy to the Provost, on the implementation of these recommendations.