From: Diane Belcher, Chair
Re: Department of Applied Linguistics/ESL: Self-study overview
Date: December 4, 2017

I am pleased to submit the Self-Study Report of the Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL. I would like to acknowledge the self-study committee for their excellent work, and in particular, Dr. Sara Cushing for her leadership as committee chair, and the other committee members: Ms. Alison Camacho, Dr. Scott Crossley, and Dr. Stephanie Lindemann. I would also like to thank the department faculty who provided input throughout the self-study process. Our self-study document was approved by faculty December 4, 2017. I have read the enclosed document closely and concur with its assessment of the department’s strengths and weaknesses as well as with the goals we have set for ourselves, which closely align with the university’s strategic plan.

Since our last program review our department has undergone a number of transitions, including the addition of several new programs, e.g., a graduate TESOL certificate program and dual BA/MA program, and the retirement or departure of several faculty members. We have also successfully weathered significant funding challenges in our Intensive English Program. I will highlight a few of the main findings of the self-study in light of this shifting landscape.

One of our department’s greatest strengths is the quality of its faculty. Whether they teach in our degree programs, credit-bearing ESL courses, or our Intensive English Program, our faculty are dedicated to excellence in teaching and to the development of the relatively young field of applied linguistics and its offshoot, TESOL (teachers of English to speakers of other languages). An increasing number of faculty members are obtaining external funding and achieving highly visible roles in our profession.

Another strength of the department is its involvement with international and interdisciplinary programs, hence its support for globalizing the university and increasing its research productivity (Strategic Plan Goals 3 and 5). We have won funding for international initiatives, such as training grants for language teachers from South Korea and Brazil, and most recently, a grant to train students from Nicaragua, have maintained or established exchanges with universities in Turkey and South Korea, and we have launched new study abroad programs in Mexico and Argentina. Within the university, we have begun language-for-professional-purposes support programs for international students in the College of Law and Robinson College of Business. Externally, faculty are engaged in health science and other cross-disciplinary research projects, including the department’s first NIH and NSF grants, with researchers at other universities.

Challenges the department continues to face include the following:

We have expanded our credit hour production since our last program review with no increase in faculty. Since our last program review, one tenured senior faculty member has retired, and another is scheduled to retire at the end of this coming semester, which will leave us with eight tenure-track faculty members. Of these eight, as noted in the self-study, four have administrative appointments—as chair, in
the dean's office, in CETL, and in OIE. As a result, we have relied on visiting faculty, part-time instructors, and PhD students to teach many of our applied linguistics courses. Development of new initiatives that we would like to pursue, such as additional international programs and community-based research projects, has been constrained by the additional advising and departmental service roles that need to be shared by a shrinking number of people. Even more crucially, the goals of continuing to grow our PhD program, migrate our graduate certificate program to online delivery, and expand our hybrid and online BA and MA course offerings will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without more faculty.

In a similar vein, although our PhD program has become more and more successful (supporting Strategic Plan Goal 2, strengthening graduate and professional programs), with heightened visibility in the field as a result of our students' growing number of publications, external dissertation awards, and professional appointments upon graduation, we have found that funding PhD students at a competitive level is an ongoing challenge. As many peer PhD programs provide much higher levels of support, it is challenging for us to attract the most talented students in our increasingly impressive applicant pool. While we are fortunate to have an IEP, a revenue-generating program, to fund many of the assistantships awarded to PhD students, there are disadvantages to heavily relying on our IEP. Chief among these is that the IEP's ability to fund assistantships is dependent on its enrollment, which, in turn, is contingent on such unpredictable external factors as worldwide political and economic developments, though the IEP's recent more aggressive marketing efforts and diversification through a number of special programs in collaboration with international universities as well as with colleges within our own university are definitely contributing to its fiscal stability. In addition, the IEP, as a language-teaching unit, funds teaching assistantships but not research assistantships, making it difficult for IEP-funded students to gain both teaching and research experience. Most of the other funding available for our PhD students also consists of teaching assistantships, either in our ESL program for matriculated students or our BA program, again resulting in limited opportunities for students to gain experience as research assistants. External research funding is enabling us to provide more research assistantships but so far this has fluctuated from year to year.

Our MA program, the department's oldest degree program, has for decades had an excellent track record in attracting applicants and graduating students who easily find jobs in the TESOL profession, in large part because of the practical training they receive through apprenticeships with our IEP and ESL faculty (again supporting Strategic Plan Goal 2). However, there has been a recent decline in MA enrollment, which may be the result of the recent proliferation of online certificate and MA degrees in our field. It is hoped that our new graduate TESOL certificate program will eventually serve as a gateway to our MA, that the new option of attaining the certificate as an add-on to the MA degree will incentivize more applications to both programs, and that migrating more graduate-level classes, including the entire graduate certificate program, to online delivery will attract a greater number of out-of-state and nontraditional graduate students, especially if there is a different tuition rate for distance learning. This online migration will require more support for existing faculty and, assuming enrollment increases, more faculty to teach the online courses.

The youngest of our degree programs, our BA program, has doubled in number of majors since our last program review. Its growth, however, appears to have levelled off. One advantage of our recent consolidation with Perimeter College (PC) is that we have been able to collaborate with PC faculty to offer applied linguistics (AL) classes to PC students, who previously had no opportunity to learn about the existence of such an area of study. Expanding AL offerings at PC should increase the likelihood that former PC students will pursue applied linguistics as a major when they proceed to a Bachelor's program on the downtown Atlanta campus, which may also have the benefit of further ethnically and racially
diversifying our already diverse undergraduate AL student population (hence supporting Strategic Plan Goal 1, becoming a national model for undergraduate education).

Because of our department’s growing number of contributions to the field, especially its publications in top-tier research journals, we are becoming increasingly well known nationally and internationally. Our PhD applicant pool, with its upward trajectory in quality and size, attests to our rising reputation. To further enhance our department’s standing, we will strive to double our external funding over the next three to five years, as well as to continue to increase the number of refereed journal articles published each year. We are well on our way to becoming one of the leading applied linguistics programs in the nation and are committed to continuing to strive toward this goal.

We look forward to the next phases of the APR process and the perspectives these will provide.