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Describing UMass Linguistics -- Key Themes & Messages

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DESCRIBING UMASS LINGUISTICS

Key Themes & Messages

Current efforts to communicate the special strengths of UMass to a larger audience organize the presentation of UMass under five key themes. These five key themes are well-suited to describing the special strengths of the UMass Linguistics Department as well, and will provide a framework with which to inform both the University community and a broader audience about the current state of the Linguistics Department and about what we are planning for the future. The first three themes-- Delivering Access to an Excellent Education, Boasting a Distinguished Faculty, Offering Exceptional Opportunity-- have been central to our mission from the outset. We strive for excellence in teaching and research in the core areas of linguistics as well as in a wide range of interdisciplinary endeavors, and are committed to offering the diverse students of this university educational opportunity that exceeds in its quality that which is offered in the most distinguished universities in the land. The fourth theme-- Partnering to Solve Societal Problems-- describes activity that a significant number of our faculty have been engaged in and in which we see growing opportunities to expand. The fifth theme-- Fueling the Economy-- is perhaps least salient in the Department's perception of itself and in the perception of the wider audience, but present activity, as well as activity we propose to embark on, clearly does also fall under this theme.

Theme #1:

Delivering Access to an Excellent Education

A. Graduate Education

- The hallmark of a UMass graduate education is considered to be the excellent training that students receive in all the core areas of linguistics-- syntax, semantics and phonology-- as well as in the experimental subfields of psycholinguistics, child language acquisition and phonetics, and the traditional fields of historical linguistics and language typology. The training is provided in state-of-the-art courses and research seminars and in close relations of apprenticeship and mentoring between faculty and students. The outstanding quality of the graduate level training in linguistics available at UMass has been recognized for some time. In the early 80's the Ph.D program ranked second in the nation; MIT was first. In the recent National Research Council rankings, UMass Linguistics was ranked as the #1 graduate linguistics program in the country. The excellence of the program is a reflection of the quality of the teaching and research engaged in by faculty members. But it is also a reflection of the extraordinary quality of the graduate students we have been able to attract to the program. As an example, last year the only National Science

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Foundation Fellowships in linguistics were awarded to three UMass Ph.D. students, and to a UMass undergraduate student majoring in linguistics.

- In the future we seek to maintain our status as the #1 graduate program in linguistics. We wish to urge on the broader audience recognition of the significant effort that will be required to maintain this preeminence. We must be able to continue to attract the best graduate students, and in sufficient numbers to maintain the 'critical mass' necessary for a viable program. To do this we require increased support from the University. **What we need to recruit competitively is an annual stipend of \$13,500. What we need to maintain a program of viable size is a restoration of the seven TA positions we have lost since 1989.** [*Afternote: Recall from the preface that, since the writing of this document, we have been making good progress towards this goal. --eos, 7/23/99*]

A survey conducted by our department last year showed that the University provides less money to fund graduate students in linguistics than any of our peer organizations (where "money from the University" includes TA-ships and fellowships). Indeed the level of UMass support relative to other institutions is shockingly low. The amount of graduate student funding we receive is out of line with the quality of our department as measured in the recent NRC evaluation. At the same time, federal grants to our faculty made up a larger share of graduate student funding than at any of our peer institutions. We have done more than any linguistics department in the country to get outside grants that will fund our students. The university has not matched this effort, but rather has dramatically decreased its support since 1989, and this is largely responsible for the significant decrease in graduate enrollment we have experienced in recent years.

We are of course aware of the level funding situation in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and so are considering the possibility of putting together a 'major initiative' for graduate support to take to the provost and or the Chancellor. We are also beginning to develop some ideas for possible fund raising. (This is in preliminary stages, and in any case, as with any development project, would not bear fruit for some years.) But we are also asking for a reallocation of resources within CFHA to contribute support that is commensurate with the quality of the program and the special contribution it makes to excellence at UMass.

B. Undergraduate Education

Our faculty has been devoted to undergraduate teaching. In recent years two of the faculty were Lilly fellows and two were awarded Distinguished Teaching awards. We have collectively been engaged in developing new ways to deliver better access on the part of undergraduates to the excellent education in linguistics that we have to offer. Some of these we are now implementing and some we plan for the future.

- **Majors and Minors**
For many years we have offered joint majors with other departments: Linguistics and Anthropology, Linguistics and Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology, Linguistics

and German, Linguistics and Japanese, Linguistics and Chinese, Linguistics and Russian. The joint majors reflect the interdisciplinary reach of the study of language.

Last year, a regular major in Linguistics was instituted. This major will better support students interested in pursuing a career in linguistics in the academy or industry. The hiring of two new faculty in semantics and phonology this year will permit us to allocate resources to the new major without sacrificing the Ph.D. program.

To further enhance interdisciplinary study in linguistics, we plan to work to develop new joint majors with language departments (e.g. Classics, Spanish), Computer Science and Communication Disorders, complementing the joint majors we already have.

Moreover, to respond to the needs of a broader range of students in other departments, we are considering developing several linguistics minors, centered around particular themes like "Language, Meaning and Discourse" (for literature, pre-law, or philosophy students), "Background for Speech Technology" (for computer science or electrical engineering students), "Language and Diversity", "Language and Education". Developing a set of thematic minors will require further curriculum development at the undergraduate level, and may well require additional resources beyond those currently available.

- **General Education**

Two of our introductory course, Ling 101 "People and their Language" and Ling 113 "Language and Diversity in the U.S." focus on topical issues that will be central in the lives of students as they become citizens of the Commonwealth, such as methods of language arts education, bilingualism, language and multiculturalism and issues of dialect. Our other introductory course, Linguistics 201 "Introduction to Linguistics" is designed to introduce students to analytic reasoning and argumentation, using the exploration into the structure of language as subject matter.

To increase student access to General Education courses in linguistics, we have begun to teach Ling 101 in the more efficient lecture and discussion format. Adequate access to our other principal General Education offering, Ling 201, taught largely by TAs, depends crucially on restoring the TA positions we have lost over the years.

Theme #2:

Boasting a Distinguished Faculty

- The excellence of the UMass Linguistics faculty is reflected in a variety of ways: in the NRC ranking of the faculty itself as #4 in the country, in the prestigious awards given to faculty members (National Academy of Science, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Guggenheim, Fulbright), in the outstanding record in obtaining federal grant support (Graph 3), in the editorships of prestigious journals, and in the influence of the faculty's publications.
- Our goal is to move from 4th position to 1st in the NRC ranking of faculty in linguistics. We believe that the new positions for which we are hiring this year will make an important contribution towards achieving that number one status. The new positions are in semantics and phonology. These are areas in which UMass already holds a preeminent position, and the new hires will bring even greater collective excellence. We also believe that we need to make a new hiring in the area of syntax.

Syntax lies at the center of the discipline. The Chomskyan revolution in linguistics grew out of the study of syntactic structure in language, and it is standard to introduce students to the leading ideas of linguistic theory and cognitive science from the standpoint of syntax. In our department we do this in a 6-credit introductory syntax course for first year graduate students. From its central position, the theory of syntax continues to profoundly influence phonology and semantics, which are typically construed as interpreting syntactic structures in the realms of sound and meaning. In recent years, though, developments in the theory of the interface between syntax and semantics and the interface between syntax and phonology (areas in which UMass is again preeminent) have begun to influence the theory of syntax itself. We feel it is essential to make a new junior hire in syntax in order to properly represent important new developments in the realm of syntax and to feed into existing teaching and research on the interfaces with syntax in the department.

A new hire in syntax will also help answer to important curricular needs. For example, we are planning to develop an undergraduate course on the structure of the English language which we believe will be of great use to future teachers in the Commonwealth. We feel syntacticians in the Linguistics Department are ideally suited to providing students with an understanding of the structures of the English language along with an understanding of how language functions as a system. Such a course would also have an appeal for computer science students who are interested in language and speech technology grounded in the linguistic analysis of English. We are also developing a 3-credit graduate-level introduction to linguistics for student outside the Linguistics Department who seek an initial encounter with the core ideas in linguistics before entertaining enrolling in our other graduate courses. We anticipate enrollment in this course by graduate students from Communication Disorders, Education, Afro-American Studies, Computer Science, and Philosophy among others.

- The symbiosis between quality of faculty research, quality of teaching and quality of graduate students cannot be emphasized enough. Interaction with outstanding graduate students provides exceptional challenges for teaching, and inevitably leads to continued innovation in research. Achieving #1 status in the NRC ranking of linguistics faculty will require that we remain truly competitive in recruiting the finest graduate students and that the size of the program be restored to earlier levels. To repeat: **What we need to recruit competitively is an annual stipend of \$13,500. What we need to maintain a program of viable size is a restoration of the seven TA positions we have lost since 1989.**

Theme #3: Offering Exceptional Opportunity

The Linguistics Department offers exceptional opportunities not only to its graduate students but also to undergraduates at UMass and to graduate students from other departments.

- The experience of education in linguistics at UMass is one characterized by small class size, considerable personal attention from faculty and rich possibilities for engaging in research. Many undergraduates have undertaken serious research projects under close supervision from faculty members.
- Given the inherent interdisciplinarity of linguistics and the institutions we have set in place to facilitate interdisciplinary work, students with a wide variety of interests and career goals are able find a base in the Linguistics Department from which to pursue diverse courses of study relating to language. Our existing joint majors, and ones we plan to develop in the future, provide an institutional framework in which to pursue interdisciplinary studies. In addition to this, there are thematic areas of research and teaching which provide a context in which students can carry out interdisciplinary work. These areas include "Issues of Dialect" (with existing collaborations with Communication Disorders, Education, and Afro-American Studies and possible further collaborations with Communication, Anthropology and English), "Cognitive Science" (with existing collaboration with Psychology, Communication Disorders and Philosophy, and possible further collaboration with Computer Science), "Native American Languages" (with existing collaboration with Anthropology and Native American Studies). Undergraduate students and graduate students from outside the department have undertaken programs of research and study in these areas under close supervision by faculty. A future thematic area of interdisciplinary collaboration we plan to explore is with Computer Science; such a collaboration would offer exceptional, unique advantages to students in linguistics and in computer science.

Theme #4:

Partnering to Solve Societal Problems

This 4th key theme has not been as central to the defined mission of the department as themes #1 through #3, but it has been very central to the mission of a number of our faculty, is integrated into the department in a variety of ways, and is expected to have an even greater place in the future.

- Collaborative research on the study of the acquisition of African American English (AAE) by children has been carried out for some time on grants held by Linguistics and Communication Disorders, with Co-PI's in both departments, and with four additional Linguistics faculty serving as active consultants. This acquisition research feeds directly into a recently awarded federal contract to support the development of tools for the assessment of language disorder in children that will avoid having normal AAE-speaking children erroneously diagnosed as having a language disorder. A recent Special Opportunities appointment has brought into our department an expert on African American English who also has a commitment to using research and teaching to solve societal problems.
- Prejudice based on language or dialect difference is endemic in our society, often the overt expression of underlying race and class prejudice. Two introductory-level undergraduate course in linguistics--Ling 101 "People and their Language" and Ling 113 "Language and Diversity in the U.S." have as central themes education around issues of language and dialect difference and language prejudice associated with these differences. Scientific arguments are presented demonstrating that no language or dialect is better than another, and the mechanisms of language prejudice are explored.

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- We hope that ties between the Linguistics Department and the School of Education will be strengthened and enriched in the future. Faculty in the department have participated in the recent debate around the teaching of reading in the state's elementary schools, and have consulted with educators developing state-wide standards for the language arts curriculum. We plan to develop an undergraduate course on the Structure of English where students will learn the distinction between prescriptive grammar and describing language, where students will learn that writing well and writing in the standard language are not to be equated, and where students will see that studying grammar involves the training of the mind. There is also potential for collaboration between Linguistics and the School of Education around issues of bilingualism, bilingual education, and second language acquisition.
- Native American tribes are putting increasing emphasis on reviving, recording and describing the remaining Native American languages, most of which are on the verge of extinction. The Pequot tribe of Connecticut and the Wampanoag (Massachusetts) tribe are currently supporting work by linguists on their languages, with a mind to eventually having the language taught and fostering cultural identity and pride. We plan to explore the possibility of making UMass the site of a central depository for materials on the languages of the original inhabitants of New England, and a center for research on these materials that could involve undergraduate and graduate students. Currently two faculty members are engaged in work on other Algonquian languages of New England. One is working with one of the last remaining speakers of Western Abenaki, originally spoken in Northern New England, including northern Massachusetts in an effort to better record and describe the language. Another faculty member is supervising undergraduate research on Stockbridge Mahican based on an 18th century dictionary.

Theme #5: Fueling the Economy

With one foot in the Humanities and the other in the interdisciplinary realm of the applied, linguistics can see its potential contributions to society both in the intellectual, cultural and moral terms of the humanist and in the concrete economic terms of the industrialist. Clearly our strength has been in the former arena, but we see some possibilities for future development in the latter.

- With the rest of the Humanities, we argue that our teaching and research "provides benefits" to the larger society, albeit ones that may not be readily quantifiable. The need for a citizenry with a humanistic education should be clear, and the intellectual, cultural and moral products of our research and creative endeavors enrich the life of the Commonwealth. (As an example of the perhaps indirect economic consequences of higher education in the humanities, one could cite the cultural and economic boom in Northampton, which is clearly related to the presence of the Five Colleges, their students and faculty.)
- Linguistics is in a position to make somewhat more direct contributions to economic development, in that products involving language that are based on linguistic research and expertise have considerable market value. For example, research on language acquisition and African American English have led to the direct involvement of Laureate Learning, Inc. and of Psych Corp., which together with the federal

government is underwriting the UMass contract to produce a dialect-neutral instrument for the assessment of language disorders in children. Another realm for making a connection between linguistics and the economy lies in the relation between linguistics and computer science. Already, a number of UMass Ph.D.'s are employed in the computer industry, where with their linguistic expertise they make important contributions to developing software applications involving language. In the coming years we plan to explore possibilities for collaborating with Computer Science in providing further training to interested graduate and undergraduate students that will allow them to readily enter the fields of language and speech technology. We are moreover in contact with alumni in the computer industry, and plan to explore possibilities of financial support for graduate students interested in careers in the computational world.

To conclude, the coming years hold exciting prospects for enriching the offerings of UMass Linguistics in the areas of the Five Key Themes. We hope to find the support from the University that will enable us to make these prospects a reality.

Respectfully submitted,

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