

UTC-WGSS External Review Narrative Report

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PART 1 – Learning Outcomes:

The Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies (WGSS) program at University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, is on par with its institutional counterparts across measurable domains—enrollment, majors, courses, and standard metrics at state, region, and national levels. Program and learning goals are in alignment with UTC’s mission and values. The goals are consistently demonstrated throughout the curriculum and current students and alumni of the program possess scholarly and professional attributes that attest to the program’s ability to foster and meet said goals and learning outcomes.

Evaluative data drawn from the department, college, and university-levels and tracking of students and alumni for graduate school and career-placement indicate strong performance (critical thinking, written skills, scholarly and creative expertise) by students who major and/or minor in WGSS. In addition, the faculty commit to ongoing evaluation and assessment of courses, curriculum, and other departmental programming. Using work samples, student feedback, and field-based models and exemplars, event participation (and other metrics) the director and the faculty are ensuring quality and achievement across the program.

The program is committed to a student-centered approach backed by institutional data and strategic imperatives to guide programmatic initiatives. This commitment has resulted in updated curriculum, new course offerings, and increases in the use of instructional technologies incorporated for pedagogical and other instructional design purposes. Newer courses have been developed in response to student interest and feedback with attention to changes in the field/scholarly landscape and in terms of skills needed to be competitive for the contemporary workforce and/or for strong graduate school placement.

PART 2 – Curriculum

The curriculum is commensurate with WGSS programs nationwide in number of required hours for the major and minor, types of projects students are engaged in, academic expectations, areas of scholarly focus, and course offerings. Due to lack of faculty with dedicated lines in WGSS, many of the amazing courses *cannot be offered* regularly or even semi-regularly.

Disciplinary standards and practices are woven throughout the course requirements in terms of research, writing, critical thinking, appropriate topics, programmatic extracurricular activities and connections to the campus and local communities.

The program faculty and the director, Dr. Marcia Noe, work together and collaborate regularly (involving students as well—when appropriate) to review, revise, analyze, and update courses, curriculum, and outreach efforts.

The program has recently developed the following (new) course offerings:

- Race, Gender & Video Games
- Popular Fiction & Social Media
- Technologies of Sex and Gender

These courses reflect both trends in the field and efforts to center student interests and foster engagement. However, disability studies, environmental feminism, and trans studies are areas for growth, and new courses built around these areas will help extend the major and minor and could contribute to other campus efforts and general education priorities.

The Department contributes widely to the university's Gen Ed curriculum making it an important service provider to the institution's goals in training students in critical thinking and analysis, communication (written, oral, and visual), and community engagement skills including leadership, activism, and collaboration. Further, the program faculty members' pedagogical methods are by design learner-centered and transdisciplinary, contributing to a well-rounded and critical experience for students. Research required of students is varied—offering students multiple perspectives and opportunities to engage mixed methods, literary analysis, applied research, qualitative projects, and other types (archival, data-driven, etc.) of inquiry and approaches.

The program criteria are clearly outlined and accessible. However, faculty constraints impact course offerings and timelines creating some challenges with scheduling for faculty and students. The program is stretched given faculty commitments to their home departments/programs; English, for example, is home to many of the faculty who teach core courses, and they are stretched thin in WGSS, as a result.

PART 3 – Student Experience

During my review, about 10 energetic and passionate undergraduate students showed up to meet me. During that afternoon meeting, they spoke excitedly about the dynamic curriculum and faculty and described how the classes they have taken have been “life changing.” These students are activists and future leaders seeking out various collaborations across campus and within the city and surrounding areas; some students indicated that they live outside of Chattanooga and

commute to campus. Students clearly want more of WGSS, including more opportunities for professional development, research, internships, and more community building within the program and with other units on campus—academically and socially. Some of the students I met with were double-majors, WGSS *only* majors, and minors in WGSS. A few of the students were non-traditional, as well. It was clear from our conversations that they wish to see WGSS have greater impact on the lives of their peers and other students on campus and in the wider community given the current state of affairs politically and globally; they see WGSS research and knowledge as valuable and important because of its potential to transform and combat disinformation campaigns, media bias, and other issues of injustice and challenges to human rights.

Because the program is small relative to other academic units, there are limitations in terms of developing some of the areas students have identified for growth, such as engagement events, more social media presence, academic extracurriculars, and community partnerships. Students expressed some concern about being able to access courses needed for their major (including electives) and stated that some courses were not offered frequently enough. They also mentioned visibility for the major and courses as a concern. Off-campus students expressed a desire for more online course offerings as well. Currently, most of the online courses are cross-listed with criminal justice and focus on a very specific area of WGSS—which is limiting for students whose interests may be outside of that particular scope/lens. Students would like to see WGSS courses on disability, sexuality, and media/communication studies offered both in-person and online, regularly.

Alumni of the program have gone on to a range of impressive careers and programs of graduate study. They also expressed admiration for the WGSS director, Dr. Marcia Noe, and program faculty like Spring Kurtz and Dr. Oren Whightsel. The alums gave glowing reviews to the courses, pedagogies, internships, and events afforded them by the WGSS program. They spoke of transferable skills from WGSS that they are using in their current workplaces (libraries, pharmacy, non-profit, and tech) and expressed how much of a value-add they consider WGSS to be in the workplace and in their personal lives too, especially given the current political climate.

Faculty members, along with the director and shared staff members, are committed to students and seem to be constantly providing support (academic, professional, etc.) and resources beyond the scope of the average faculty member. Students are comfortable offering feedback and sharing concerns with all members of the WGSS program/community.

PART 4 – Faculty

All faculty members in the program are highly qualified and represent a range of professional and scholarly expertise. Each faculty member possesses an advanced degree in their field of study with additional credentials in women, gender, and/or sexuality. The interdisciplinary

backgrounds represented by the faculty include: English, History, Criminal Justice, Environmental Studies, Legal Studies, Psychology, Religion, Race & Ethnic Studies, and Health—to name a few.

The WGSS program relies on faculty housed in other units to cover courses; the program also uses adjuncts regularly to help meet scheduling needs. As faculty retire, go on sabbatical, or take other types of leave, WGSS will face potential challenges, as the program is already stretched by competing demands that faculty face in juggling requirements in their home departments and other units.

Faculty expressed the utmost pleasure in their WGSS teaching, research, and collaborative experiences. They spoke highly of one another and of the students in their courses. They are proud of their professional accomplishments in the WGSS domain. Many expressed a desire to do more in WGSS specifically—teaching, student support, course development—while lamenting the time constraints and scheduling demands placed on them because of other university or departmental required service and/or administrative duties, in addition to finding time for regular research and writing.

Faculty members in the WGSS program represent diversity in terms of personal background, disciplinary training/academic areas of study and focus, gender identity, and age range. This is beneficial to the program and to students. Faculty members are highly engaged in pedagogy, staying current across multiple fields of study, and are doing greater amounts of service (in WGSS and other programs/departments) on behalf of students and colleagues than the average faculty member at UTC. They also do a lot of events, student support, community-based work, and creative endeavors, in addition to the standard conference presentations, participation in professional organizations, and research/publication commensurate with professorial expectations depending on rank and position. All members embody UTC's mission and values, and they seem to genuinely care for students.

PART 5 – Learning Resources

WGSS is uniquely positioned within a larger Humanities cluster/structure as a program of study or academic track. Because of this, folks are decentralized to an extent in terms of office locations, classrooms, and shared common space. However, they remain well-organized and manage to collaborate regularly, despite this challenge.

The program budget is small and might be increased in alignment with specific goals and initiatives within the Humanities major and/or within the broader UTC campus community, for example in student engagement and retention, online growth and development, or other areas of focus aimed at strategic priorities. Often WGSS programs are underutilized in helping to meet key needs on campus; I recommend looking at the kinds of work being done by faculty and

students to maximize the unit's potential for consideration in future campus-wide endeavors and academic opportunities.

Part 6 – Support

The WGSS program has a lot of connections to area non-profits and Chattanooga-based entities and organizations. Internships, research activities, and partnering with organizations for programs is central to the curriculum. Again, a modest budget increase could provide compensation for student projects aimed at increasing visibility for the major, minor, and WGSS courses more generally.

Additional funds can also be used for faculty stipends geared toward creation of new courses—including development of online courses. Extra funds for programming (WGSS has a very robust Women's History Month series of events) could fill some gaps in engagement with other WGSS programs in Tennessee and could be used for students to experiment with community-building events, as well. A public-facing undergraduate research symposium was an idea floated by both students and faculty as an outlet to attract people to the program and promote the excellent work being done by students under faculty supervision.

The director should continue to receive course releases and stipend for the tremendous amount of labor she is dedicating to the program. Another part-time staff person or student worker would be helpful for coverage across multiple aspects of the program, but an absolute necessity is the hiring of another faculty member whose main role would be to teach required classes regularly, while assisting with the creation of new courses.

PART 7 – Summary Recommendations

Ultimately, the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program has many strengths and qualifies as a high caliber educational space; the curriculum and quality faculty members contribute to the WGSS program at UTC being very much on par with larger institution (including R1s) WGSS programs and departments. Much has been achieved due to the program's iconic director, Dr. Marcia Noe, whose dedication and scholarly acumen were resoundingly recognized and praised by students, faculty, and alumni. Indeed, each member of the core faculty were lauded by students and program alums. However, in these shifting academic winds and currents in higher education writ large, even high-quality programs that focus on women/gender/sexuality are being attacked and the administrative impulse seems to be to hide, defund, or eliminate them. This would be a mistake, as WGSS has the potential to expand general education, attract double majors, and partner with its humanities counterparts (especially environmental studies and global/international studies) to increase course offerings and programs.

The **top priority** for WGSS at UTC involves a new faculty hire; I recommend a dedicated line that would enable smoother scheduling, guarantee greater equity in faculty distribution (since all faculty teaching in WGSS are located in other departments as their primary placements—many of those being in English) and less stress for the director who does a great deal of maneuvering to ensure coverage of core classes and adequate elective offerings. This would be the biggest investment required to advance programmatic needs. The hire should be made at the associate level to guarantee a focus on course development and teaching rather than on research/publication focused on efforts to earn tenure. If a full line in the program is not possible, a shared line with one of the other humanities areas would suffice as a temporary/short-term solution.

Another key area for growth is in the development and creation of online courses and virtual events. Students who commute to campus as well as non-traditional students (parents, students with full-time jobs, etc.) really need more options and greater accessibility.

The director and other core faculty should work with the administrative team (Dean and Provost) to access student data that has potential to increase enrollments and majors—as well as visibility of programs being offered by the unit. WGSS is an excellent and proven value-add to pretty much any/every degree-field or academic discipline; the alumni are living-proof of this, and the research confirms it. Hosting alumni events (in-person or online...possibly in collaboration with other Tennessee colleges/universities) to highlight the potential of the double-major and to increase and affirm its worth and transformative capacity could draw new students, stakeholders, and community members whose interest, engagement, and support/partnership could be useful in a variety of ways. Extending and increasing partnerships and collaborations with local organizations and with area WGSS programs and departments (at other colleges and universities in and across the state) more broadly would also be a good investment that could lead to opportunities for students and faculty alike—deepening relationships often leads to viable innovation and ideation, as well as network connections that support sustainability, advocacy, and professional opportunities.