A. Summary of the activities of the review committee and materials reviewed

This committee consisting of five members was formed in September 2019 to evaluate the academic programs in Linguistics that are administered by the recently formed Language Sciences Program (LSP). The members met L&S Deans Susan Zaeske and Elaine Klein on October 24th to go over the essentials of the charge for this committee and to clarify the scope of our task. We were reminded of the fact that our charge is to review the academic programs in Linguistics rather than their administrative home, LSP, which is in its second year of existence. We kept this in mind throughout the process of our review, but since the success of the programs can only be ensured by the stability and viability of the administrative home, our report from time to time refers to the (mostly positive) aspects of the newly established program.

The committee held our initial meeting on November 5 to discuss our observations of the self-study and appendices provided by LSP and to develop our plan for further information gathering. Subsequently, with the assistance of the LSP director, Professor Eric Raimy, we arranged a series of meetings with faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate students:

On November 22nd
- Professor Eric Raimy (LSP Director);
- Dr. Rebecca Shields (academic advisor, Lecturer of Linguistics 101, and an alumni of this graduate program);
- Undergraduate student group, consisting of five students at different stages of study;
- Graduate student group, consisting of four students at the course work, who have been admitted to the program during the last three years.

On December 6th
- 9 faculty members from different home departments (4 LSP, 1 English, 2 Spanish, 2 Psychology), individually or as a group of two to three;
- Exit interview with Professor Eric Raimy.

All the meetings were attended by multiple members of the review committee, including the chair, to confirm our understanding of what was said by different parties.

The committee met once more on December 10th, to discuss what we learned from the series of meetings and to develop a list of points to be made in our report. What follows is therefore our evaluation of the self-study, as well as the accounts provided by the informants during these meetings.
B. An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the program

1) Overview

The review committee noted many strengths of the current program, as well as some important challenges. On the whole, the committee viewed the program as heading in the right direction, with many positive developments. Meetings with the faculty indicate that they share this positive evaluation. All the faculty and staff with whom we met viewed the new structure of the LSP as a strongly positive change for the program overall. Many faculty members expressed excitement about increased opportunities to work with colleagues in other departments and to explore new research directions.

Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed strong enthusiasm about the program. Undergraduate students noted that the program supported and contributed to their interest in and desire for studying linguistics, with the introductory linguistics course playing an important role. Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed appreciation for the faculty members who are cutting-edge researchers in the field, and at the same time are accessible, approachable, and encouraging to students. Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed a strong sense of community, and they noted the important roles of the welcoming space and the regular departmental events (especially the weekly forum called “Linguistics Fridays”). Students also recognized and expressed appreciation that department leadership was responsive to their concerns and needs. Students especially appreciated two areas in which department leadership demonstrated this responsiveness, namely, the recent increase in the number of capstone course options and the recent effort to once again offer course work in Semantics.

In the context of these many strengths, the review committee also noted some substantial and ongoing challenges. The current configuration of LSP is still relatively new, and some further adjustments in organization and administration are likely to be necessary. One key challenge has to do with the limited number of LSP faculty (i.e., those whose tenure home is LSP) and the fact that all of them are relatively senior full professors. At present, it is not clear how the program will transition to a younger program/department that is well positioned for the future. If the current cluster hire searches yield new hires whose tenure homes are in LSP, these individuals will play a key role in shaping this transition. However, the cluster positions may not be sufficient to insure a smooth transition.

A related issue is that several of the affiliated faculty (whose tenure lines are not in LSP) are critical to making the current program work effectively. However, these individuals also shoulder many responsibilities in their home departments and other affiliated programs. Thus, another key challenge will be establishing arrangements with affiliate faculty that are sustainable and mutually beneficial.

With respect to course offerings, one important challenge that was repeatedly noted, both in discussions with faculty and in discussions with students, was the need for regular course offerings in Semantics. This will be addressed in the near term by the upcoming change of workload for Dr. Shields; however, this is a temporary solution, and long-term solution is needed. Another challenge regarding course offerings lies in coordinating courses offered by
LSP faculty and those offered by faculty in other departments. It would be helpful to students to keep an updated list of all relevant courses; however, this will require a concerted and regular effort on the part of staff, as changes in offerings are frequent and many different departments are involved. We suggest that this administrative role not fall to Dr. Shields, as she already manages many other aspects of the program, and it is important not to overburden her position.

Finally, it is worth noting that the chair’s assessment was that the undergraduate program is working well but that the graduate program needs some focused attention. Our focus group discussions with students gave us the opposite impression, with graduate students expressing a high level of satisfaction with the program, and undergraduates raising concerns regarding course offerings and availability of seats in existing courses (sometimes related to issues with prerequisites). At the same time, the committee noted several long-term goals for the graduate program, specifically with respect to the desirability of reasonable growth in size (and the attendant need for increased funding) and increased diversity in the program. These goals and the associated challenges may be highly salient to department leadership, but less salient for the current graduate students.

2) Undergraduate Program

We discerned a number of strengths with the undergraduate program from our meetings with undergraduate students and faculty. Despite all the challenges posed by the recent structural transition from the Department of Linguistics to the Language Sciences Program, the undergraduate program has continued to attract a healthy number of undergraduate majors. The major lends itself well to students pursuing double majors; many of the students are pursuing another major alongside linguistics, with English, other language majors such as Spanish, communication sciences and disorders, and computer science well represented, among others. Students can declare the major without prerequisite, and they can complete the required 30 credits for the major in timely fashion. There are a large number of elective courses that count for the major; this setup provides students with a fair amount of flexibility in planning their courses of study.

Students also reported a warm sense of community in the department. Contributing factors to this feeling include the lounge space available to them at 1151 Van Hise, as well as the student organization. Overall, undergraduate students reported that the faculty are open and knowledgeable. Dr. Rebecca Shields in particular was cited as a highly effective and popular instructor for Linguistics 101, which attracts students into the major.

At the same time, some challenges were raised during our meeting with undergraduates. The absence of Semantics was noted as a particular gap in the current regular course offerings. Students also noted that the 101 Introduction to Linguistics courses tends to fill up quickly with students not majoring in the field, which can prevent intended majors from getting into the course during their first semester. This issue has been somewhat alleviated by the recent addition of an additional TA, but the course still fills up rather quickly. Some students have faced challenges fitting the capstone course into their sequence of courses, since it was previously offered only once per year, but it will now be offered every semester with a rotating topic. Students also noted that although the list of elective courses in other courses seems extensive,
many of those courses have prerequisites outside linguistics, designed for majors in those other departments, which linguistics majors will likely not have satisfied. This means that there are not as many available electives in practice as on paper.

We asked the undergraduates about any additional courses they might like to see that were not currently on offer. They mentioned a desire for more options in computer science (CS) geared towards non-CS majors, including both introductory topics and natural language processing. There was also some interest in more classes in which they can gain research experience. There is an honors option in the program, but only one among the current 51 declared majors is pursuing it. It may take too much time for the many students who are double majors. One student who had studied abroad, meanwhile, also mentioned that it would be helpful to have clearer mapping between the courses in the program in Madison and courses abroad. Students also mentioned that while the program had good support for students who were thinking of applying for graduate school, there was not as much advising available concerning options outside of academia.

We also asked the students about the planned named options discussed in the self-study report prepared by LSP. Some were interested, but not all. They raised questions about the potential effect of named options on the challenges they face in identifying and coordinating elective courses.

3) Graduate Program

The graduate program has been undergoing a strategic restructuring over the last 5 years in terms of administration, faculty and curriculum. The restructuring accomplished under the concept of “language sciences” has created a broader community of faculty and graduate students from other departments such as English, Spanish and Psychology, and appreciation for this restructuring was expressed in all the meetings. Graduate students noted that access to diverse faculty introduced them to theoretical and methodological approaches they might not have otherwise explored. Faculty also noted the fact that their courses attract graduate students from diverse departments and programs, enhancing interdisciplinary dialogue. The committee recognizes many strengths resulting from these changes.

The current graduate students generally gave very positive reviews of the program, in particular, in the areas of mentorship and departmental climate. They expressed that they receive excellent mentoring and preparation for academic and non-academic careers, with realistic expectations. In their “Linguistics Fridays,” students are encouraged and supported to write/present papers, as well as to invite in “guest speakers” to help them make connections with diverse experts in the field. They felt supported and motivated in their studies and expressed feeling a sense of safety and encouragement in the department. The faculty and their commitment to student success were highlighted by the graduate students who believe their voices are elevated by mentors and advisors through co-written papers and through support to develop term papers (including practice presentations) into conference papers. Communication between graduate students and faculty seemed strong. Students expressed that when there is a perceived gap, all they have to do is mention it and it will be addressed. They expressed overwhelming confidence in this process.
Affiliated faculty also spoke to the impact of “Linguistics Fridays,” reporting that students and faculty seem happier in sharing their interests in teaching, learning and research than in the past, when the previous structure allegedly remained “proudly narrow.” Climate was also improved by the restarting of the student organization with graduate and undergraduate participation, as well as other departmental strategies such as the new lounge available to students for study, meetings, mock presentations, etc., and in which the department puts snacks for students during exam periods to encourage group study.

Prior to 2013 the program received approximately 80 applicants and offered admission to the top 50% without funding. Since 2014, under the new structure, the program switched to making only two to three offers per year—a smaller number of students they can fund, mentor and graduate. They began matching candidates with funding and with mentors and prospective advisors, with an aim of 5-6 years to degree completion. The last candidate before this era is currently completing the degree. With the implementation of this new strategy, the attrition rate is expected to get better over time. To account for the three recent cases of departure, one person left after figuring out that he wanted to do something different, one person left after the Masters degree because their spouse left the country, and one pre-2013 person came back in and left again.

Currently the program has four graduate students who were admitted under the new scheme. All these graduate students are funded. One student has a 5-year guarantee, while the others without multi-year guarantees have also been funded by a variety of TA- or PA-ships. Students expressed that this small program size gives them the necessary one-on-one access to faculty—they can generally walk on the floor of the department and expect to get the help they need. The downside of the size of the program, of course, is the availability of number and types of courses. However, students feel that the courses offered through different departments are helpful and that key strengths lie in the diversity of languages offered at UW-Madison (over 50 languages taught) and in the cutting-edge research and innovative approaches of the LSP faculty.

The committee recognizes that the decision to admit fewer students whom the program can support both academically and financially as a smart move. It is hoped that this shift will improve the completion rate and time to degree.

LSP is moving towards creating a 5-year funding guarantee at the time of admission as a part of its strategic redesign. This will be accomplished by making creative use of partnerships and combining Fellowships, TA-ships, PA-ships, FLAS fellowships, etc. In that regard, LSP has recently signed an agreement with the English Department that will guarantee three TA positions per year for the next three years. The current funding arrangements will ensure the admission of three new students per year, but probably not beyond. Given the available resources, the current job market, and the size of other comparable programs, this appears to be a reasonable size.

There are various ongoing efforts to recruit students from underrepresented populations – notably, efforts in Native American communities, with plans to build a pipeline with the tribal colleges. (In fact, the program successfully recruited a Native American student in the recent past, although the person left the program in order to pursue a different career.) These efforts, however, are directly tied to individual faculty research and interests. Generally, there is not a
clear strategy for recruiting members of underrepresented groups. However, given the major transformation that LSP has undergone in the recent years, it is understandable that they had to prioritize the solidification of new structures before expanding their efforts in this area.

Indeed, one of the main weaknesses identified is graduate student funding and how this is tied to recruitment. This is the challenge of competing with programs such as Chicago, NYU and Berkeley in recruiting strong candidates, as these are established programs that regularly offer strong funding packages. The current funding does not allow LSP to be competitive in this regard. In fact, much of the strategic redesign was based on lack of funding and inability to recruit and retain strong candidates through to degree completion. As mentioned above, the future plan is to admit only three new students per year, amounting to 15 students in the program over five years. This is considered doable with the current funding arrangements (combining fellowships, TA-ships, PA-ships, FLAS fellowships, etc.), but probably not fully sustainable, given many of these funding sources are based on relationships and partnerships for TAs in other departments. LSP also struggles with a structural deficit in the program budget from a 10-year budget embargo.

Though the curriculum appears well rounded, a few weaknesses were identified. The lack of Semantics was identified as a weakness by graduate students as well as by other groups. LSP has received approval to adjust Dr. Rebecca Shields’ appointment, which will enable her to teach Semantics in the future. This is, however, a “band-aid” measure and not a long-term solution. The committee recognizes the need for a faculty member able to teach in this area. Faculty also reported that linguists with data science and computational linguistics experience are highly valuable, but LSP does not have anyone teaching these areas. Further, there is lack of clarity regarding the availability of seminar courses that satisfy the nine credit requirements for grad students and the selection of seminars for specific students’ needs. Graduate students report that there are not enough seminars with enough diverse topics. Currently accredited seminars are dependent on approval of faculty advisors. In theory, any seminar by LSP faculty could count towards the fulfillment of the requirements, but it can be challenging to identify suitable seminars for each student’s research interest. The overlapping of material was also raised as a concern. The advisor-student relationship and oversight should prevent students taking random seminars, but the committee recommends the development of clear guidelines as to what different categories of required courses are supposed to accomplish. In this process, it is essential to survey courses and seminars offered in other departments and units that partially overlap with different concerns and to better synchronize them. For recruiting and advertising purposes, the creation of some templates that students can follow may be necessary.

Finally, we also noted that currently, all students have identified LSP faculty as advisors, and wondered if it would be possible to have non-LSP faculty as primary advisors for students down the line, for various structural reasons. Finally, students admitted under the current set are still at the course work stage. As such, how the program is going to work at the prelims and dissertation stages has not yet been tested.
4) Governance/infrastructure

As mentioned earlier, the focus of the current review is on the academic programs and not on LSP per se. However, we could not help but notice how the restructuring that resulted in the creation of LSP has brought about a number of positive developments to the academic programs in linguistics. The affiliated faculty from diverse home departments whom we interviewed all expressed their excitement with this new, open, transdisciplinary structure and its potential for devising further innovations in developing new courses and extracurricular activities or modifying degree requirements. They are committed to the success of LSP and regularly participate in monthly standing executive meetings, electronic communication/voting, and/or the “Linguistics Fridays”.

Having said that, we also detected some vulnerability in the current structure, as well. Currently, of the twenty faculty members listed on the LSP website, only four faculty and one academic staff have their lines in LSP. Because LSP members whose tenure home is elsewhere have their teaching obligations associated with the home department programs, there are not enough faculty to offer core Linguistics courses on a regular basis. As noted earlier, the inability to consistently offer Semantics is a major limitation. Further, one of the four LSP-proper faculty, Professor Rand Valentine, is retiring at the end of the current academic year, and all other LSP-proper faculty are relatively senior full professors. We understand the ongoing searches for the cluster hire initiative successfully proposed by LSP affiliates could land one or two new assistant professor(s) in LSP, but that does not seem enough. In order to sustain the academic programs, LSP needs to come up with a robust hiring plan, weighing both its traditional strengths and emerging trends.

Second, and relatedly, as much as we were impressed by the commitment to and enthusiasm regarding the success of LSP expressed by the non-LSP-proper affiliate faculty, we fear that their energy may not last forever if there is no concrete reward or incentive beyond intellectual stimulation. These faculty members with transdisciplinary mindsets and goodwill are often tapped, not only by their home departments, but also by various other units on campus. Despite their interests, the amount of actual teaching and mentoring that these members can provide to Linguistics majors is somewhat limited because of their other obligations. For instance, it appears unlikely that non-LSP-proper faculty will serve as primary graduate advisors in the near future. It is also unlikely that team teaching will become common, given the lack of university support, and this is also an obstacle to having non-LSP-proper faculty engaged in the program.

Finally, Professor Eric Raimy, who has held the chair/director position since 2013 and has led the restructuring discussion and implementation, plans to step down from the director position after the 2020-2021 academic year. We applaud his remarkable leadership, and we hope the program can identify an individual who can lead the collective efforts by keeping this momentum going.
C. Recommendations for future directions

In summary, the committee found that the recent restructuring has brought about a number of positive developments in the undergraduate and graduate academic programs, and we are hopeful that further changes will be explored under the current governance/administrative structure. Based on the findings discussed above, the committee would like to make the following recommendations:

1. [Curriculum] We strongly urge the program and the university to work together to establish resources in order to ensure that a Semantics course is regularly offered. Not offering Semantics constantly handicaps the curriculum, puts students in the program at a significant disadvantage compared to peer institutes when they go on the job market or apply for graduate school, and in turn weakens the attractiveness of the program.

2. [Curriculum] We highly recommend natural language processing as a future direction for the program to enhance student pragmatic data mining skill training. We expect a large job market demand for students with these skills. Possible approaches include new hires with computational skill sets, or building connections to computational departments on campus.

3. [Curriculum] We recommend that the program make sure elective courses are available to undergraduate students who want to take them. The program should establish a mechanism to coordinate with course-offering departments and update students frequently on what electives are offered and what the prerequisites are, in order to address enrollment issues.

4. [Curriculum] We recommend more study before establishing named options for the undergraduate major. In particular, more thorough market research would be helpful, including analyses of job market trends, student needs, and feasibility vis-à-vis course coordination.

5. [Student funding] We recommend exploring further collaboration with other departments to establish MOUs similar to the one established between English and LSP in an attempt to solidify funding sources for graduate students.

6. [Graduate student recruitment] We recommend that the program develop a more concrete and robust plan to increase diversity in the graduate program.

7. [Staff funding/structure] We recommend that more resources be allocated to assist the program advisor. The current program advisor, Dr. Rebecca Shields, is extremely effective, but further administrative assistance in the management of the logistical challenges—course scheduling coordination, data gathering, etc.—should be considered in responding to the recommendations discussed above (especially Items 3 and 4).

8. [Hiring] Given that a number of current LSP faculty are going to retire in the near future, we recommend that the program work to articulate what it wants to be known for in five to ten years, in order to identify its hiring priorities.