

Department of English Assessment Yearly Report
Graduate Component
2007 - 2008

I. Assessment Activities:

A. Program Goals:

The primary goals of the English MA program are to increase the student's knowledge in literary and related fields, including writing and composition, language study, and linguistics; to prepare students for more specialized courses of study at other graduate and professional schools; and to assure that the writing and literary analysis skills of students meet minimum professional standards. A five-hour comprehensive examination is given at or near the end of the candidate's course work. A minimum overall GPA of 3.0 is required for graduation. Students also have a thesis option in addition to the exam.

B. Learning Outcomes/Data Collection:

Twenty-two five-hour comprehensive program exams were administered during 2007-08.

C. Results:

Three MA students received scores of Excellent; eighteen received scores of Pass; one student received Unsatisfactory and retook the exams successfully in the following session.

II. Plans:

We continue to examine graduate offerings and revise them if needed, and to evaluate the comprehensive exam in terms of its usefulness as an assessment tool while considering additional options including the submission of a portfolio of student work followed by a project defense. As we add new course tracks in composition and rhetoric and linguistics, we continue to develop set rotations of graduate-level courses so students can better plan their course of study while still allowing the possibility of special topics courses at that level.

III. What has the department learned?

While we continue to emphasize the comprehensive examination as the primary MA assessment tool, we have added student and discussions as part of Assessment Day (see below) and also have solicited faculty write-ups on student performances in each graduate class in addition to course grades. Based on feedback from MA students and graduate

faculty, our Curriculum Committee is also considering how to create graduate level courses, especially at the 600-level, as a set rotation of generic “umbrella” titles that would allow for individual topics to be inserted; for example, a standing title like Topics in Medieval Literature could encompass individual courses whose focus would vary from offering to offering (e.g., Arthurian Legends; Dante) while still allowing period coverage/major areas of concentration. Already we have added a 600-level Studies in Genre course, as well as many new offerings in composition and rhetoric and in linguistics.

Assessment Day results:

Briefly, what we learned from informal surveys by and discussions with graduate students is that most seem to be satisfied if not pleased with their experience in our program. Almost all student responses (ten submitted, from students at various stages of completing the M. A.), cited program strengths as owing to the department’s “knowledgeable and (mostly) concerned professors” although some exceptions were noted. Others noted the program flexibility as a particular strength, whereas another admitted to feeling “lost” in such a framework but also noted: “which is my fault, but indulge me a little?” One student lauded the attention given to helping students focus their knowledge and skills but noted that “once we graduate, we need to eat and pay off our loans and sometimes I feel the department has tunnel vision.” Students assessing individual courses noted that all classes identified are helping them in some way progress toward attaining at least two or more often more of the specified department goals for graduate studies pertaining to the acquisition of knowledge and abilities.

After meeting with the six graduate students who attended our Assessment Day meeting in person, the English graduate faculty met to discuss some of their comments and concerns. Out of a division that arose when this group of students assessed the usefulness of ENG 630, Material and Methods of Research, which is currently the one course required of all M. A. students in English, regardless of intended subspecialty (literature/creative writing; linguistics; composition/rhetoric), the graduate faculty proposed developing one more generic required “gateway” course for English graduate students who would thereafter choose one of the concentrations specified above and then take a more specialized “gateway” course designed for their particular area of interest: ENG 630 would then become a second required “intro” expressly for lit/creative writing and for undecided students, whereas linguistics or comp/rhet students would take the intro courses and sequences required by these more recently-approved and implemented tracks.

One other outcome of our departmental discussions is that the department chair suggested that we might wish to designate an assessment committee across our faculty and programs.

General assessment summary:

With the aim of building assessment activities that are embedded in student coursework and that can provide feedback about the success not only of our students but of our curricula and faculty in attaining the specified goals, we have:

- 1) developed and implemented assessment descriptors for departmental goals/outcomes deriving in part from the model provided by our undergraduate program;
- 2) updated those to reflect additions to departmental curricula (composition and rhetoric, linguistics) at the graduate level;
- 3) developed a form for and asked faculty to add assessment commentary at the end of each semester when they submit grades for graduate students;
- 4) developed a form for and asked students to self-assess progress toward goals (related to Assessment Day);
- 5) developed and implemented a form for and collected assessment days surveys regarding the program in general;
- 6) asked departmental subcommittees to form and consider alternatives to current M. A. comprehensive exams for assessment;
- 7) discussed in the Curricula Committee and on Assessment Day alternatives to traditional comprehensive exams that the department may use both to assess individual student performance/development and departmental support for those efforts. For example, we could provide an assessment option of a portfolio submission followed by an oral defense of three 20-25 page essays at a level appropriate for publication/submission to doctoral programs. To prepare, students could present their essays-in-progress in panels throughout the year; a course for students preparing this assessment option could also be developed.