

## Undergraduate Program Assessment

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures  
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B. A. Degrees in French and Spanish Language & Literature  
Teacher Education Option in French and Spanish  
B.A. Degrees in German Studies

Academic Year 2013-2014

### Modes of Assessment

#### 1. Portfolio Paper and Reflective Piece

During the semester in which they are to graduate, all French, German, and Spanish majors submit a research paper that is representative of their best work. It is placed in their student portfolio along with a faculty report on the student's oral presentation for the capstone course: the FLF, FLG or FLS 492 Senior Seminar. The portfolio is evaluated by foreign language faculty based on the student's competency in critical analysis, interpretive skills, cultural knowledge and understanding, writing style, and ability to communicate accurately and effectively in the target language.

#### 2. Capstone Course

The capstone course, beyond providing an extensive study of a specialized topic, is intended to be the culminating intellectual experience in which students: Explore ethical issues, develop research methods, cultivate decision-making, problem-solving skills, and critical and creative thinking; Pull together concepts, ideas, skills, and subject matter that they have learned in previous courses; Analyze their strengths and weaknesses; Demonstrate Computer Literacy; Undertake a substantial research project and give an oral presentation of the project. In the preparation of the research project and accompanying presentation, students bring together knowledge, skills and abilities developed through coursework and other high impact learning experiences such as study abroad, internships, service learning and volunteer work. All graduating seniors enrolled in the seminar are required to prepare, as part of their course work, an oral presentation on a discipline-specific topic. The presentation should demonstrate the student's ability to interpret critically and analytically as well as present information in an original manner. This presentation consists of a ten-minute in-class critical interpretation demonstrating the ability to speak and present in the target language at advanced level proficiency according to the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) guidelines for speaking. The instructor of the course invites other faculty members to attend the student presentations and, together, this faculty confers on an evaluation of the students' oral proficiency.

### **3. Writing Course**

Normally in the sophomore or junior year, when majors are enrolled in the advanced language courses, students are engaged in a number of “process approach” techniques for the improvement of writing skills, including brainstorming, multiple drafts, and peer-review. Students in these classes are asked, near the end of the semester, to assess their overall improvement in writing and their ability to express themselves in clear, accurate prose. The instructors of the courses distribute a questionnaire to the students and then gather the responses, which are submitted with a short report on the course to the Associate Head for incorporation into the assessment report. The report is shared with section heads and they work with instructors of the courses to develop strategies that will enhance student performance in the future.

### **4. Culture Course**

All majors enrolled in courses with a significant cultural component [FLF 308, 315 & 321, FLG 315, 420, & 430, and FLS 341, 342, 343, 351, 352, & 353] are assigned a project/paper dealing with a cultural theme in which students are asked to analyze products, practices and perspectives of the communities where target language is spoken. Through these assignments, they demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the ways in which the target language cultures and civilizations have evolved, how they differ within diverse countries, and the values that shape those cultures. Evidence is also sought in the ways that students compare and contrast the target-language cultures and demonstrate a critical understanding of the patterns of social interactions, as well as the meanings, attitudes, values and ideas of these cultures. The projects are graded by the instructor of the course and a brief report is prepared, describing the ways in which the learning outcomes have been addressed. The report is shared with instructors of the courses and when shortcomings are noted in students’ abilities to achieve the goals and objectives of the courses, instructors work together to develop strategies to improve student performance.

### **5. Exit Interview**

All graduating seniors in December and May are asked to complete an Exit Interview Questionnaire and to attend an Exit Interview (in English) with a rotating committee of FLL faculty. On the written questionnaire, the students are asked to rate their oral language proficiency in either French, German, or Spanish upon completion of the B.A. degree and to compare that with the ability that they possessed when they entered the degree program. Students are provided with a standardized format for the interviews following the *ACTFL Guidelines Data* which are collected by the chair of the committee conducting the interviews, and summarized into an Exit Interview Report. The Exit

Interview Reports and Questionnaires are on file in a central location in the department and are accessible to all faculty. The Report is distributed to all faculty who teach upper-level courses in the various concentrations. The faculty of each language section meet to discuss the information provided on the report, to identify any areas of a program that appear to need attention based on the information provided by the graduating students and to discuss, plan and implement changes that are determined to be necessary and appropriate.

## **Assessment**

### **1. Portfolio Paper and Reflective Piece**

Portfolio papers were evaluated by faculty members. The findings show that the majority of our majors are writing papers at the Advanced level or above according to the ACTFL scale (<http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org/writing>) and are also demonstrating critical thinking skills in literary interpretation. Some were rated at the Superior level, yet some were only at the Intermediate High level. Issues of accuracy in use of the target language are evident in some writing samples. For example, some graduating students are still making basic grammatical and spelling errors and some tend to translate directly from English into the target language which results in awkward and incorrect usage. Some students are not using the proper format for bibliographical information, quotations, and footnotes. Other students are having difficulty going beyond plot summaries and cannot present and adequately support an argument, or provide a critical literary analysis. Faculty are aware of these issues and will continue to share ideas and expectations, and course-level specific activities and assignments, to improve students' ability to communicate accurately and effectively in the target language.. The reflective pieces show that all of the students have a passion for the paper they wrote and for the subject matter they treated, and understand their strengths and weaknesses as writers of a second language. Many of the papers are insightful and show a sincere appreciation for literary traditions and cultures. A number of the papers show that students think creatively and possess the ability to express themselves in an original manner. Instructors need to work together to try to find ways to help the weaker students progress, perhaps taking advantage of the abilities of the stronger students. Cooperative learning may be effective for some assignments leading up to the final project or paper so students who possess skills in one area but not in another can learn from classmates who have different skills and abilities.

### **2. Capstone Course**

Student presentations evaluated by faculty members were reviewed. In oral proficiency, the mean is intermediate-high, with some at the advanced level. In critical analysis, the levels were about the same. All of the students at the advanced oral level

had studied abroad for at least a semester, something the Department strongly encourages students to do, or had participated in another high impact learning experience beyond the classroom such as an internship, volunteer work or other experience that afforded sustained time in a target-language community. This past year, over three-fourths of our graduating seniors had study-abroad experience prior to the capstone course and felt that this experience had served them well. A new program of volunteer work for Spanish majors has proved to be very beneficial for participants and may provide an alternative for students who are unable to go abroad for a variety of reasons.

**3. Writing Course**

Course reports for FLF 310, FLG 309 & 310, and FLS 331 & 332 and sample student papers were evaluated and reviewed. In all courses peer-editing of rough draft papers proved to be very effective. Through the use of a guided list of questions that targeted specific language and conceptual problems, students sharpened their ability to critique and correct each others' work, and were eventually able to recognize and correct certain error patterns. A self-evaluation sheet following the return of graded compositions allowed students to analyze their error patterns more specifically. This information helped our instructors to anticipate the types of problems they will encounter with future students, and to develop lesson plans accordingly. Our students still struggle to write error-free prose; many are challenged to write clearly in their first language and most agree when asked that learning grammar and writing skills in a second language helps them to be better writers in their first language.

**4. Culture Course**

Course reports and sample student papers were evaluated and reviewed. Students engaged in a variety of activities in FLF 308, 315, FLG 315, 430, FLS 342, and FLS 353 including group presentations, short investigation assignments on the internet, and small group discussions. Student papers were quite original in these courses and explored cultural similarities and differences between the U.S. and either French-, German-, or Spanish-speaking countries. Almost all of the students in their course evaluations stated how their perception and understanding of the target cultures had changed during the course and how they had learned to understand a target culture through its practices and perspectives, and not through the lens of their own practices and perspectives. Although the teaching of culture is emphasized in most FL courses, the culture courses allow students to explore in greater depth, topics of particular interest to them.

**5. Exit Interview**

The Exit Interviews gave a wide range of student feedback on their experiences as an

FLL major. Most were generally satisfied with their instructors and courses. Almost all highlighted, as distinct and even unique for the university, such qualities of the department as the diversity of its faculty, their accessibility, attention and willingness to help, ability to stimulate and intellectually challenge students, and small class sizes. There was a consensus that study abroad is vital to their success, and most of them participated in a study abroad program. Yet many students felt that in upper-division courses faculty do not always make enough effort to encourage students to participate in discussions and develop their conversational skills. This concern is being discussed in the sections: faculty in upper-level courses with specific contents such as literature feel they should not have to spend the time in the remediation of students' speaking and writing abilities; yet this is often what the students need. Some students expressed concern that in upper-level courses, there was too wide a range of student abilities, some advanced, and others barely keeping up, which was detrimental to their individual progress. This is always a challenge as our upper-level courses have a diverse range of students. There are majors and minors in the same courses, and the majors generally have had more exposure to the language than the minors; hence the different levels of ability in the same course. In addition, native speakers and heritage speakers of the target language are in upper level classes and such students naturally possess stronger skills than non-natives in certain areas. Non-native speakers may be just as strong or stronger in overall academic performance but they do not speak as fluently. Instructors need to be aware of the needs of various groups of students and work to maximize what each can contribute to a class. Grouping students in a variety of way for activities that have different goals can be very effective and managing class discussions so that all students have the opportunity to contribute and feel comfortable doing so are objectives that all instructors must work to achieve.

### **Conclusions**

In assessing these materials, the Department has learned that it is achieving its goals in the French, German and Spanish majors; yet, improvements can be made in students' oral and written communication skills in the target language. The French, German, and Spanish sections meet on a regular basis to discuss how our students can receive the training they need in upper-level skills courses [grammar, composition, conversation, and reading], so that they are adequately prepared for their upper-level literature, culture, and capstone courses.

