

# UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

## DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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### Review & Assessment Plan Student Learning in the Major Department of Comparative Literature April 30, 2006

#### I. OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Established in 1917 as a Program, in 1927 as a Department, Comparative Literature at U. W. Madison offers a B.A. and a B.A. with Honors in the Major, an M.A. and a Ph.D. Both graduate and undergraduate students in Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin, Madison study literary and cultural texts in their original languages *comparatively across strategically specified historical periods, geographical areas, and literary and cultural movements*. Comparative Literature, then, is the site for the critically informed, linguistically and culturally fluent study and understanding of the now globalized diversity of literatures and cultures. In an age of intensified globalization and the concomitant need for meaningful understanding and connection between sometimes dizzyingly divergent cultures, Comparative Literature is more than ever a vital component of higher education in and beyond the humanities, as well as of fluency in critically understanding and analyzing the world around us and the role of culture and the humanities in that world.

Students in Comparative Literature learn to read carefully in multiple languages and literatures, to analyze and think critically about what they read, and to compare – rather than simply juxtapose or trace influence – across national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries as well as across institutional disciplines. They also learn to engage in critical comparative analysis across historical periods. For the departmental curriculum engages a uniquely broad historical range of literatures, languages, cultures, disciplinary and theoretical questions and problematics. In addition to *critical reading and thinking skills in multiple languages*, our students are trained in *oral and written communication* and in presenting their comparative analyses *to diverse audiences in diverse formats*.

#### Undergraduate Majors

Over the past 10 years, our UG majors have grown steadily, increasing from 20 in AY 1996-97 to 36 in AY 2004 - 05 and currently (AY 2005-06) stabilized – given our small faculty – at 29. This is in spite of the fact that our faculty FTE *declined* in the same 10 year period. We have nonetheless managed to sustain and expand a vibrant community of UG majors. Our students win awards for their research and theses and go on to exemplary careers or to graduate schools across the country. Undergraduate degrees conferred in Comparative Literature have remained a fairly stable .1 - .2% of the degrees awarded in L&S over the past ten years, reaching a ten year high mark of 7 B.A.s awarded in AY 2004 - 05. Given the shrinking FTE of the Department over the same ten year period, these numbers are striking; relative to our FTE, our UG majors and degrees in the major have grown remarkably.

## Graduate Students

For nearly the past ten years, we have limited the size of our graduate student body, attempting to maintain an average of twenty-five graduate students. This departmental decision was based on statistical analyses of the mid-1990s by professional organizations in the humanities, most notably the Modern Language Association, about the overproduction of Ph.D.s in a shrinking academic job market. Reducing the size of our graduate student community by approximately 5 students, we continue to place our graduate students well, training outstanding scholars in the field. The yearly number of graduate degrees conferred in Comparative Literature fluctuate somewhat more than B.A. degrees, as, once past the M.A., graduate students do not proceed through the program at the same pace. Graduate degrees conferred in Comparative Literature have fluctuated between .2 - .3% of the degrees awarded in L&S over the past ten years. As with our B.A. students, this number is an accomplishment given our FTE number.

## II. PROGRAM LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### For the B.A. in Comparative Literature:

- literary fluency in at least one language other than English;
- comparative understanding of and ability to critically analyze a range of literary texts;
- intellectual familiarity with critical and theoretical concepts of the literary and the comparative;
- critical familiarity with the literary canon in the field of comparative literature;
- critical reading, thinking, writing, and oral speaking skills to enable the expression and communication of the above.

### For the M.A. in Comparative Literature (usually awarded *en passant* in progress toward the Ph.D.):

- *literary fluency* in at least one language other than English
- developing fluency in a historical body of critical, theoretical, and literary texts which form the basis of the discipline (Second Year Examination Reading List, reviewed annually by students and faculty, and partially covered in CL 702, a required course, and CL 771)

### For the Ph.D. in Comparative Literature:

- *literary fluency* in three languages other than English, one of which must be a major non-western or an ancient or medieval language;
- familiarity with the three major historical-literary fields of the ancient and classical periods, the medieval to early modern periods, and the 17th century to the contemporary period;
- fluency in literary critical and theoretical concepts of literariness, of culture, of the comparative;
- comparative understanding of and ability to strategically compare a range of literary and cultural texts and their contexts
- fluency in the theories and practices of translation as it relates to the field of comparative literature;
- critical familiarity with the literary canon in the field of comparative literature;
- the ability to discover, examine critically, integrate, preserve, and transmit knowledge in the comparative literary field to a diverse audiences.

## III. STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

### Assessment in the UG Major

Our assessment plan in the major, instituted ten years ago, is working well, offering us an ongoing process to assess our students. Files are maintained for each UG major with a check-sheet for degree and major requirements satisfied, special actions taken, professors' comments on academic progress and achievement. Our curricular points of assessment are as follows.

#### a. Entry point assessment:

After declaring their major, for which students must have taken at least one of the two requisite departmental literature survey courses in a specific historical period (CL 201, 202, or 203) and have a 3.0 GPA, students are required to take CL 310 (Introduction to Literary Criticism) as an entry point to upper division work in the major. The results of that (writing intensive) class is used to assess the ability of majors as they enter the department. An additional early point of assessment are our Honors series courses which are writing intensive and satisfy the Comm. B requirement.

#### b. Progress assessment:

As they proceed in their work in the major, the grades and performance in the 3 required foreign literature classes (3 - 5 classes for "Honors in the Major" students) are reviewed as a means to monitor linguistic and literary proficiency in a single foreign language. This proficiency, gained outside the department but fundamental to comparative literary work, is also assessed in Comparative Literature courses as students work in those courses on the literatures in the original language on which they have chosen to focus.

Additional assessment of critical thinking, reading and writing skills is the goal of the two required (and writing intensive) courses in literary criticism and theory (CL 371 and/or 475).

**c. Conclusion of major:**

The capstone seminar (CL 690) is a required writing intensive course for all Comparative Literature majors. The small course format and focus on a broadly inclusive comparative topic and the discussion and writing requirements for that course constitute the basis for the assessment of our majors as they conclude the major.

In addition, for our Honors in the Major students, a Senior Honors thesis is required. Students who do not elect the Honors in the Major option or who do not qualify for that option may still choose to write a senior thesis.

The work of all Comparative Literature undergraduate majors is eligible for a yearly essay prize competition and award for that year's outstanding undergraduate essay in Comparative Literature.

Of course, had we more faculty, we would also do systematic follow-up surveys with our graduates. For now, however, we maintain periodic contact with our alumni informally tracking their careers or subsequent studies.

**Assessment in the Graduate Program:**

The objectives of the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature are itemized above. Assessment in the Graduate Program is under the supervision of the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), who is also chair of Graduate Review Committee (GRC) and conducted in cooperation with the departmental Chair. Our Graduate Program assessment plan was instituted ten years ago and works well, given our small faculty numbers, offering us an ongoing process to assess our students. Graduate student files are maintained by the student's advisor with a check-sheet for degree and minor requirements satisfied, special actions taken, professors' comments on academic progress and achievement. The Graduate Review Committee reviews the progress of our graduate students after the conclusion of each academic year. If necessary notices are sent to the student and her advisor regarding academic progress. Additionally, our curricular points of assessment are as follows.

**a. Entry point assessment**

Assessment at the onset of the graduate program is done through the DGS's and Admission Committee's review of all graduate student application materials, particularly and most importantly the review and assessment of the student's requisite writing sample and statement of purpose. Additionally, assessment at this point in the program is based on prior course work, on foreign language training, and to a lesser extent, on GRE scores. The files of accepted incoming students are further reviewed for possible fellowship nomination by both the DGS and the TA and Fellowships Committee.

**b. Progress assessment**

There are a series of progress assessment measures in place at each stage of the graduate program. Foremost among them is the review, at the end of each academic year, of the files and progress of each of our graduate students by the Graduate Review Committee (GRC) under the supervision of the DGS (who is usually the Chair of that committee). When necessary, letters evaluating student academic and intellectual progress are sent out by the GRC to both the graduate student and to the graduate student's advisor.

There are, in addition, a series of assessment measures to evaluate accomplishment and progress in each of the areas specified in the M.A. and Ph.D. learning objectives above.

--Assessment of literary and linguistic fluency in a second language is made by the "Examination in a Second Language" usually taken in April of the first year of graduate study.

--Assessment of foundational knowledge in selected literature (based on the first two years of graduate course work) and in theory and criticism in the field of Comparative Literature is the object of the "Second Year Examination," usually taken in April of the second year of graduate study.

--For those students who are offered TAs in the department (and we try to offer at least a semester or two to all of our students before the end of their graduate careers), training in and the practice of teaching in Comparative Literature, of communicating to an undergraduate audience the basic premises of the field, are guided and assessed in CL 731: Introduction to Teaching in the Discipline taught each fall. In addition, in the course of their T.A. careers, the supervising professor -- and for probationary T.A.s the T.A. Review Committee -- reviews, observes, and evaluates the T.A.s work at the end of each semester in which they work as a T.A.

--Assessment of focused comparative knowledge in three areas--two of which are delineated by the student in close consultation with her advisor and Ph.D. committee, one of which must be the field of comparative literary criticism and theory--is accomplished through the three written essays that constitute the Ph.D. preliminary examination. Those written essays are then the basis of a subsequent oral examination at which all three of the Ph.D. committee members are present as well as two additional departmental members. This promotes the same faculty familiarity with virtually all of the graduate students and their work as in the case of the undergraduate program.

--Within six weeks of successful completion of the Ph.D. prelim exams and oral, the student meets again with her committee to present an initial draft of a dissertation proposal.

This intensive series of planned stages in the graduate program, though demanding for faculty and students, are a means to ensure close supervision of graduate work and to allow the continuing assessment of progress and achievement in the discipline.

**c. Conclusion of graduate major**

--For a Ph.D. student, the culmination of her graduate career--the integration and articulation of what she has discovered, questioned, critically examined, and preserved--is transmitted in her dissertation. The closely monitored progress of work on the dissertation and the final product itself are the culminating means of assessment of the student's graduate career in the discipline.

--Finally, the professional placement of our graduate students is a post-graduate marker for assessing the quality and effectiveness of our graduate program and its training of students. We continue to maintain contact with our former graduate students, their professional careers, and their general whereabouts through an updated departmental database on names, addresses, and affiliations. And we periodically send out letters from the Chair and occasionally a departmental flier to announce our new directions and make new or renewed connection to our former students and to our colleagues in the field.

**IV. THE FUTURE**

I will take this opportunity to reiterate in closing our collective assessment on the role of Comparative Literature and its graduate and undergraduate programs in the liberal arts mission of a major research university at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century -- since there seems to be some lack of understanding in this regard.

We continue to believe we have a unique but important role to play in relation to the College arts and humanities mission and beyond. It is a role made even more critical by the proliferation of information and illustration in a global age--but a proliferation most often starkly lacking in a framework within which to situate, critically examine, understand, and assess-as-knowledge that information.

Comparative Literature is by definition "diverse," since we are trained to study literature and culture without the restriction of specific boundaries of one language, one national formation, one geographical area, one identity, one national discipline, or one collectivity of any sort. Hence, as part of our disciplinary mission, and as part of our relation to the liberal arts mission of the College, we are able to examine and evaluate--*assess*--new theories, methodologies, and emerging literary and cultural phenomena and their contexts. The pluri-lingual and comparative

nature of the discipline, our training, our curricula, our graduate and undergraduate programs ensure that differences among peoples and their literary and extra-literary cultures will be studied and respected, that our students and faculty can, with open and critical minds, “engage in the fearless sifting and winnowing in the search for truth” which must be the foundation of an educational institution as it is the ground on which our discipline moves.

All of the learning assessment measures noted above at the undergraduate and the graduate levels are already in place and have been in operation for the past ten years. Because of our restricted faculty size, we have not been able to initiate further or new assessment tools, though we are happy to do so once our FTE is allowed to grow to a stronger number. The meaningful education of our students, both graduate and undergraduate, is a vital part of our mission to the College, to the campus, and to the discipline – but most of all to the students themselves, in the effort to form a community of critical thinkers and citizens who will move us toward a world not just of more information but of greater understanding, not just of more exchanges but of more meaningful connections.