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Department of German

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To: Gary Sandefur, Dean, L & S

From: Rob Howell, Chair

RE: L & S Assessment Plan Update Project 2005-2006

Overview. The Department of German offers degrees in German at the BA, MA and PhD levels with a wide range of possible areas of concentration depending on student interest.

At the BA level the Department has just instituted a sweeping simplification of its major requirements as a result of ongoing assessment efforts. This simplification eliminated the three undergraduate major tracks of German Literature, German Culture, and German Linguistics, instituting instead a simple requirement of 27 credits at the advanced level in any subfield of German. We believe that this restructuring allows students to complete traditional concentrations if desired while also allowing students to choose a broad range of major coursework. The restructuring has also allowed the Department to simplify its advising structure, an development that has significantly reduced student confusion about major requirements. Currently there are 87 German majors, and an average of 30 students per year have graduated with German majors over the past three years.

At the graduate level the Department offers MA and PhD degrees in three areas of concentration, Literature and Culture before 1600, Literature and Culture after 1700, and in Linguistics. Currently the Department enrolls 65 graduate students, with students completing, on average, 8 MA degrees and 4 PhDs per year.

The Undergraduate Program. The undergraduate program aims to develop excellent German language skills among its majors as well as advanced understanding of German Linguistics, Literature and/or Culture. Undergraduate majors typically combine the German Major with a second major. A large number of our undergraduates go on to incorporate their knowledge of German into their eventual careers. A very small number of German majors (perhaps 1-2 per year) goes on to pursue graduate work in German.

Assessment of undergraduates begins with the German placement test during SOAR, an assessment instrument that allows us to place students with prior knowledge of German in courses at an appropriate level. Subsequent direct assessment is accomplished through performance evaluations, theses (normally honors majors only), and a senior capstone seminar required of all majors.

The Department also administers and analyzes indirect measures to assess student learning. The most frequent indirect measure of student learning is provided by anonymous course evaluations administered at least once per semester in each course taught in the department. These evaluations provide the department with information on the perceived effectiveness of instructors, teaching materials and courses offered. This information in turn helps us to identify necessary remedial steps as well as especially effective components of our program. All undergraduate German majors are also asked to complete an exit survey, though the completion rate is not what it might be. The Undergraduate Program Committee will look in to the possibility of making this exit survey available on line, a medium that may provide a better yield of responses.

In the Dutch program (not a major), students frequently take proficiency tests administered by the Dutch Linguistic Union to receive certification of competence in Dutch as a Foreign Language. Madison is one of very few testing centers in North America. While the cost of the test is covered by the Dutch program, students cannot be compelled to take this battery of tests. Nonetheless, students most often see the utility of certification and very often complete an extensive set of tests.

The Graduate Program. All graduate students are required to undergo an oral proficiency interview and writing assessment in German in the year they enter the program. Identified deficiencies are addressed in the summer following the first summer of graduate study, when students are sent at Department expense to a summer language program in Germany. Graduate students are subsequently required to submit at least one required paper in a course written in German so that we can monitor the required progress toward near-native proficiency in written academic German.

Direct assessment of graduate students learning outside of the normal performance evaluations comes at three additional points. The first assessment is the MA examination, a two-hour written examination on MA coursework followed by a one-hour oral examination. The MA examination also serves as the qualifying examination for admission to the doctoral program.

Upon completion of doctoral coursework, students must take a PhD Preliminary Examination, which consists of a two hour oral examination, in most cases including a defense of a written description of the planned dissertation project. The student undergoes a final rigorous assessment at the defense of the presented dissertation project. This oral examination, typically attended by at least five professors, including at least one colleague from outside the Department, lasts two hours and may result in required revisions of the dissertation before the PhD can be conferred.

Indirect assessment of learning comes in the form of course evaluations at the end of every semester as well as an exit survey sent out to all students when they leave the program, with or without the desired degree.

Finally, all graduate students assemble teaching portfolios to document their performance as German instructors in our program. Teaching portfolios are at present an expected component of any application for a professional teaching position.

Other Assessment Activities. The Department has two committees charged with responding to the results of ongoing assessment activities, the Undergraduate and the Graduate Program Committees. These committees, consisting of four faculty and two graduate student members, propose changes in the respective programs and bring suggested changes to the entire department. Recent outcomes of these committees' deliberation include the recent simplification of the undergraduate German major as well as the complete revamping of the PhD Preliminary Examination.

Conclusion. Given the relatively small size of the Department's faculty (14.6 FTE), we feel that we have a relatively robust set of assessment activities in place for our undergraduate and graduate measures. While it would be possible to enrich our direct assessment plan at the undergraduate level with, for example, language proficiency testing and student portfolios, current staffing levels make such initiatives impractical at this time.