

Department of German Assessment 2013

Undergraduate Program

The Department of German offers an undergraduate major in German, as well as an undergraduate certificate.

The undergraduate-level “Certificate in German” was developed and subsequently introduced in 2009 based on assessment of student interests and learning needs. Over the years, the Department had witnessed significant growth in the number of students who were interested in pursuing study in German beyond the beginning and intermediate levels, but not at the level of a major. They expressed a desire to obtain a certificate in German as a complement to other major areas of study. The Department undertook a formal survey which lent quantitative support to previous anecdotal evidence that an Undergraduate Certificate in German would be a useful complement to the undergraduate program.

On a larger level, creating such a certificate promotes a number of Essential Learning Outcomes articulated as part of The Wisconsin Experience. Foreign language learning by its very nature advances “knowledge of human cultures” in a direct way. But also in terms of “intellectual and practical skills,” the experience of reflecting on the ways that language is connected to the ways humans think and interact with one another enables students to communicate more effectively in their native language and increases their ability to think crucially and creatively. Finally, the certificate program is rooted in the idea that the student of German (and other languages) is part of an integrative whole, whereby “content” and “skills” are inextricably linked. Enrollment trends since the introduction of the certificate show the value to students of offering a credential to acknowledge their accomplishments within this framework. Since its inception four years ago, certificate enrolments have grown to exceed the number of our majors (currently: 81 majors, also trending upwards over the past 4 years, and 94 certificate students).

Formal program-level assessment has up to the present taken the form of a written exit survey of graduating major students. The outcomes of this survey have always been positive. Since such surveys net only a modest return rate and are an indirect assessment measure, however, the Department plans to add at least one level of formal assessment.

We view our intention to add at least one level of formal assessment as an opportunity to define an explicit set of assessable learning outcomes for our students. The Department of German has a strong tradition of ongoing informal embedded assessment. The faculty and teaching staff in this department of modest size monitor their students’ accomplishments and discuss these outcomes amongst themselves, in order to make curricular adjustments; this happens in the context of the undergraduate program committee (which is also the curriculum committee for the Department), recently under the leadership of our Director of Undergraduate Studies, and in departmental meetings. We have found this to be a meaningful and effective practice over the years, but now, during the upcoming academic year, plan to discuss ways of formalizing this process.

Beyond the Certificate, all regular German majors must complete at least one so-called “capstone” course, which brings together the various “intellectual and practical skills” addressed

above, such as inquiry and analysis of a particular topic in German literature, culture, and linguistics; written and oral presentation of the results of critical and creative thinking; and accessing information via technological media in order to enhance teamwork and problem solving. The capstone seminar instructor and the DUS/undergraduate curriculum committee chair collaborate in evaluating and keeping a record of work completed in the capstone seminar as a final snapshot and documentation of learning goals achieved; as a contribution to program-level assessment, we anticipate using these materials for a more formal and specific assessment of learning outcomes in future years.

Graduate Program

At the graduate level the Department of German offers M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in three areas of concentration: Literature and Culture before 1600, Literature and Culture after 1700, and Germanic Linguistics. Currently the Department enrolls 45 graduate students (compared to 65 in 2006), with students completing per year 4.5 M.A. degrees, 3.5 preliminary examinations, and 4 Ph.D. defenses (averaged over the past 7 years, fall 2006 through spring 2013). About 2 students per year complete the M.A. only, without proceeding to or completing the Ph.D. preliminary examination. Placement data indicates that 19 of the 28 candidates who completed the Ph.D. since fall 2006 placed into academic teaching positions, 2 are in post-doctoral positions, 4 define themselves as independent scholars, 2 are employed in “other” fields (bank compliance, editing), and one has an unknown status.

In 2009-10 the Department reviewed its M.A. and Ph.D. course requirements, increasing the Masters program to 30 credits and modifying the Ph.D. coursework accordingly with differentiation between continuing students and those who enter the program with the M.A. in hand. Moreover, in a series of revisions over the past 5 years, both the M.A. and Ph.D. preliminary examinations have been transformed into forward-looking, research-oriented opportunities to assess directly graduate learning. At the M.A. level students answer questions about a revised seminar paper and a short statement on future research plans in a one-hour oral examination that may also include questions about Masters-level coursework. The committee, consisting of three Department members, also decides whether the candidate qualifies for admission to the doctoral program. Upon completion of all doctoral coursework, students take the Ph.D. preliminary examination. The candidate prepares a reading list in three areas that intersect at the dissertation focus and a dissertation prospectus (usually the length of a seminar paper) that serve as the basis for the two-hour oral examination with three committee members. The doctoral candidate undergoes a final rigorous assessment at the defense of the presented dissertation project. This oral examination, typically attended by 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 Ph.D. can be conferred.

In addition to these formal examination tools, there are a number of additional learning assessment tools. These include a determination of language proficiency in German through the Goethe Certificate C1 examination during the first year of graduate studies (administered at the Goethe Institute in Chicago with Department financial support). Students need to *pass* the internationally recognized examination before being admitted to the doctoral preliminary

examination. For students whose native language is German, an assessment of written and oral proficiency in English is required instead. Graduate students are subsequently required to submit at least one required paper written in German per year so that we can monitor the required progress toward near-native proficiency in written academic German.

Among the less formalized assessment instruments in the graduate program are various advising and evaluation opportunities. All new students are assigned to the Graduate Advisor who encourages and helps them to choose at the latest in the third semester of study a faculty graduate advisor in the student's area of future specialization (this individual usually chairs the examination committees). Moreover, all faculty engaged in graduate teaching meet at the beginning of each spring semester to discuss the status and progress of every graduate student in the program. Indirect assessment of the graduate program also 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 today an expected component of any application for a professional teaching position.

The Department has a standing committee (Graduate Program Committee) with three faculty and two graduate student members who are responsible for fine-tuning the policies governing graduate studies in German. The committee gathers information and feedback from faculty and students, evaluates how current policies function, and organizes regular forums or meetings relevant to graduate student professionalization (e.g., identifying sources of research funding, applying for an academic position, prepping for interviews for a teaching position, constituting a teaching portfolio).

Given the relatively small size of the Department faculty (15 FTE), we consider our robust array of formal and informal assessment tools at the graduate level adequate to provide us with feedback on the program and our students' progress.