

Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Program Assessment Plan (updated May 1, 2006)

1. Overview of the program

The M.A. Degree Program in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) is administered by the Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia (CREECA). The goal of the program is to provide rigorous interdisciplinary area studies training for students interested in careers in or related to Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia. The MA degree program in REECAS admitted its first cohort of students in 2001. Since then it has graduated 12 students, who are now applying their area knowledge in positions in the US military, federal government, and private industry. A few of our graduates have continued their education in PhD programs and others are conducting research in the field.

2. Program learning objectives

Our program has the four central learning goals for our MA students. By the end of their course of study (generally lasting two years), students should:

1. Have competence in a regional language (a language of Russia, East Europe, or Central Asia) at a level necessary for doing advanced research in and/or professional work in the region
2. Possess a broad understanding of the cultural, political, economic, and historical factors that have shaped the development of societies in Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia at a level necessary for doing professional work (i.e. writing briefings, taking part in policy debates)
3. Demonstrate adequate knowledge of the methodological and analytical approaches of multiple disciplines (i.e. History, Geography, Political Science, Languages and Literature, Anthropology) in understanding the cultures and societies of Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia
4. Demonstrate knowledge of the methodological approaches in a chosen discipline (i.e. History, Geography, Political Science, Languages and Literature, Anthropology) at a level necessary to conduct advanced research in that discipline

3. Current evaluation of student achievement

CREECA currently conducts both direct and indirect assessment of all our students at every stage of their program.

- Faculty members evaluate student performance in their classes and report students' strengths and weaknesses to CREECA (the Director, Associate Director, and other members of the faculty) for discussion and action.
- Exit surveys. All students graduating from our program are asked to complete an exit survey assessing the program.
- Alumni surveys. Every four years, we conduct a survey of our alumni to find out if and how they are using their regional knowledge in their careers.

4. Examples of recent changes.

- Based on departmental dissatisfaction as well as student frustration with the MA thesis, a requirement of the program through spring 2004, this requirement was modified starting fall 2005. Students now have the option of writing an MA thesis in their chosen field of discipline OR of taking an additional (third) graduate-level seminar (preferably in their field of discipline), in which they produce a seminar paper that demonstrates the student's ability to engage in original research as well as the ability to use original language material. This change was implemented in recognition of the fact that most of our students are interested in careers in governmental and non-governmental organizations, not necessarily in academia. Students who plan further academic study are encouraged to pursue the thesis option.
- In response to graduate student exit surveys requesting a greater "sense of community" and "more comprehensive view of area studies," the MA Program in REECAS will reintroduce for the fall 2006 semester a weekly seminar series, which all students in the MA program will be required to attend. Presentations will be given both by guest scholars and by members of the CREECA faculty. By introducing all the students to members of the core faculty—as well as by providing them with an overview of methodological and analytical approaches—we hope to foster greater intellectual sharing between students and faculty in the program.

5. Recommendations for Improving Assessment Processes

- **Expansion of exit survey.** Currently we do conduct an exit survey of students who successfully complete our program. But what information are we missing about students who leave the program before completion? In the past, any information on obstacles to a student's completing the program was purely anecdotal. The exit survey model could be expanded to any student who leaves the program before the conferral of the MA or who requests a leave of absence.
- **Language proficiency.** To date we have not adopted a set of language proficiency goals for our students, although the program has been structured in a way that fosters the acquisition of higher proficiency levels. (This has been done in two ways: 1) encouraging students to focus on one or two languages, rather than acquiring a "smattering" of elementary language courses, and 2) encouraging students to use the summer between Year 1 and Year 2 for intensive language study.) With the assistance of the language departments, we would like to begin introducing standardized assessments, such as the ACTFL OPI. At the moment, this option would only be available at the UW to students in Russian, as the coordinator of the Russian language program is an ACTFL-Certified OPI tester. But other assessment exercises are being developed for the LCTLs of our region and we could introduce them into our program in cooperation with the Language Institute and other Title VI National Resource Centers and Language Resource Centers.
- **Addition of a capstone exercise.** While students have always had the option of presenting their MA thesis in a public forum, none to date have taken opportunity of this. But the presentation in a public forum of their final work—be it the MA thesis or the final seminar paper—could be beneficial in terms of assessment and community-building. Not only would students demonstrate that they are able to apply perspectives and methodologies from various disciplines in analyzing our region, but a public presentation would offer another opportunity to bring together our faculty and students.