

Undergraduate Assessment Report

Department of German and Scandinavian

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Learning Goals for the German major

a. Language: Students should master skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing up to an advanced level, and become proficient users (C1-level) of German according to the internationally recognized standards and proficiency levels determined in the Common European Frame of Reference for language learning (CEFR).

b. Literature: Students should be able to identify, define, and illustrate with major works of literature the main concepts of literary analysis, in their forms specific to the German language traditions, including the major periods/movements (and their social-historical conditions), genres, and interpretive paradigms, as well as several main themes.

c. Culture: Students should be able to describe and provide examples of several main aspects of contemporary German culture, including governmental structures, major news media and periodical publications, and contemporary cinema, literature, and arts.

d. Critical Thought and Writing: Students should be able to write essays of 5-7 pages that argue fluently in a coherent, logical, and persuasive manner for independently developed interpretive positions on cultural artifacts of verbal and nonverbal form.

Assessment Methods

As the Program review SERU 2016 - Academic Skills Department Results & Comparisons demonstrated, writing is presently the lowest ranked skill in our students' responses. To determine if students are meeting departmental learning objectives with respect to *d. Critical Thought and Writing*, we assessed written paper assignments from different stages of their undergraduate careers. We collected three papers from each student, one written for one of the students' first upper-division literature courses in the department, one from the middle stage, and a final one written in the last or second last term before graduating with a German major. This allowed us to assess the progress they were making in producing coherent, logical, and persuasive prose—in the target language. The students were representative of our broader German major population in that they were at different skills levels when they entered the program. Learning outcomes were assessed by using three categories of assessment: *accuracy*¹ (grammar and spelling at the C1-level), *fluency* (vocabulary, word choice as well as syntactic, collocational and pragmatic characteristics), and *content* (argumentation, organization and logic). The collected information consisted of final papers which the students turned in at the end of consecutive terms.

¹ The first aspect of the assessment (accuracy) overlaps with learning objective *a. Language*. This is because non-native speakers must balance multiple issues in their final papers, as they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of the skill in a new language in addition to content, organization, purpose.

Status, Outcomes and Results

Student 1

The strongest student in the group was, from the start, able to express herself in German spontaneously and fluently without frequently having to search for words. Already in her first paper, which she submitted during her second term in the major program, she used the German language effectively and flexibly, and her writing was marked by a relative absence of error. Moreover, the paper was clear, structured and contained detailed statements on complex topics. Not untypically, her progress slowed down significantly and there was no noticeable improvement from the first to the second and even third term papers she submitted. This kind of language plateau is typical for students who have reached a certain level of proficiency.

Student 2

The second student had a significantly lower level of proficiency. His first paper showed that while he had a basic understanding of German that allowed him to write about familiar topics in a clear, standard, albeit often inaccurate, language, he had difficulty expressing more complex ideas in the target language. However, over the next three terms, the student's level of writing proficiency improved significantly. The student showed more proficiency in organizing his writing, and the papers experienced a reduction of surface difficulties with spelling, syntactical constructions, and vocabulary, especially when early drafts were corrected and edited by the instructor.

Student 3

The writing proficiency level of the last student was already at an intermediate stage when she started as a German major. This was evidenced by the first collected paper, which showed an intermediate level of coherence, topic appropriateness, formal mechanics, and accuracy. While the student's oral fluency in German did not improve in major ways over the next few terms, her second and especially last paper, submitted in her final term before graduating, showed significant improvement in her use of discipline-appropriate terminology and concepts. The student had also achieved a higher level of both argumentative and linguistic competency as demonstrated by these later papers.

We will discuss the findings in the report at our January 2018 GerScan faculty meeting. At this point, faculty will also consult on the most effective methods to achieve the highly complex, cognitively involved skill of writing for foreign language students.

Decisions, Plans and Recommendations

Because writing, like oral language, is socially embedded, interactive and functional, writing development, like speech development, is best facilitated by opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction. That being said, one recommendation is for the department to promote communication and proficiency in the written language, while also responding to the students' writing in a way that underscores writing as a process of communication, interaction and proficiency. So, rather than urging students to "write only what they can say," the goal would be to help them choose topics that they are invested in, and teach them to avoid the pitfalls of interference from their native language and the subsequent building of bad habits in the target language.

In addition to consulting with the other faculty and the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, the Director of Undergraduate Studies will conduct a writing workshop for German majors and minors in

Winter 2019. The workshop will offer custom instruction sessions aimed at meeting specific pedagogical goals, depending on the individual students' skill levels. That being said, the sessions will be tailored to individual students' needs and will directly address course-related writing assignments. Another goal of this workshop will be to identify skill gaps and students who could benefit from additional instruction and tutoring. Another possible action plan for improvement may involve the implementation of a Capstone Project as part of the German major program, involving a two-term process in which students pursue independent research on a topic of their choice, and — with the guidance of a faculty mentor — produce a polished paper that reflects a deep understanding of the research problem while also demonstrating mastery of German writing skills.