Assessment Plan—PhD in English & Comparative Literature, University of Cincinnati

March 2015

Program Overview:

Graduate studies in English at the University of Cincinnati began in 1906, and by 1913, the program offered a sophisticated graduate curriculum. The department established the creative dissertation for PhD candidates in the 1960s, as one of the first in the country. The graduate program has had a history of distinguished faculty and graduates in literary research, critical theory, rhetoric and composition, professional writing, and creative writing. Currently the program offers unique and significant interdisciplinary opportunities, particularly with the Departments of Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies, History, and Romance Literatures & Languages.

The PhD program in English features three tracks: Literature & Cultural Studies, Rhetoric & Composition, and Creative Writing. The degree is designed to prepare our students for careers as teachers (primarily as college faculty), as scholars, as writers, and in general as contributors to the future of English Studies, whether through scholarship, creative work, teaching, or other professional activities (some of our graduates are professional writers or editors, scholars attached to libraries or other institutions, or higher-ed administrators, among other occupations). Our tracks are designed to offer great flexibility for graduate students to pursue their wide-ranging interests, and in turn to produce versatile graduates who can thrive either in academic jobs or in an increasingly broad variety of related fields.

Goals for Student Learning

a) Students will demonstrate competence in a range of ways to analyze, study, and write about texts, focusing on an awareness of the relationships among language, stylistic choices, and social factors.

b) Students will demonstrate knowledge of appropriate critical and theoretical vocabularies and perspectives about reading and writing so that they can become part of the ongoing national and international discussions central to their disciplines.

c) Students will demonstrate the ability to critique, edit, and revise written texts, whether their own, their peers’, or their students’.

d) Students will learn and demonstrate mastery of the conventions of writing a paper suitable for presentation at a professional conference.

e) Students will complete and defend a sustained piece of scholarship or a book-length, fully developed creative work that can earn publication either immediately or eventually.

f) Students will learn and refine a variety of strategies, ranging from the traditional to the innovative, to help improve the reading and writing of others, being helpful and responsible to the needs of their peers and especially to those of less experienced students.
Where these goals are introduced, developed, and achieved

Goals a, b, and c: These learning goals are central to all seminar coursework in the department, across our three PhD areas (Literature & Cultural Studies, Rhetoric & Composition, and Creative Writing), and are introduced and reintroduced in each seminar or workshop. The student’s accomplishments in this area are assessed at the end of each semester by his or her professors, who grade and comment upon final essays, creative works, or scholarly projects as well as on drafts and written work assigned throughout the semester. Progress toward these goals will be assessed again by a broader range of faculty in annual track-specific meetings designed for the purpose (details below). There’s yet another reassessment at the time of exam preparation, as the student collaborates with each of two faculty members to define, compile, and refine exam areas and lists; then the progress toward these objectives is confirmed and re-judged by those two and a third faculty member by way of the written qualifying exams and the oral defense of those qualifying exams. At this point the PhD student enters candidacy, and the summative experience of the degree, and the mark of the goals’ achievement, comes by way of the dissertation, which is written under the primary supervision of a professor and then rigorously defended before a committee of at least three graduate faculty members.

Note: Peer review and editing (goal c) is a crucial element in a wide variety of coursework in our department; it is integral to all creative-writing workshops, to the teaching practicum, and to the required Teaching College Writing seminar.

Goal d: Goal d is an implicit aim of all seminars in literature and rhetoric & composition and in creative-writing workshops. The subject is introduced and developed in the Professionalization Seminar required of first-year PhD students, and our faculty members work tirelessly with students on an individual basis to help them attain this competency. In addition, we have established and are developing further departmental structures to aid in this goal. We have formed a Professionalization and Job Placement Committee, and each year, in cooperation with the English Graduate Organization, we conduct meetings and workshops on identifying relevant conferences, applying to them, and writing and revising conference papers; on writing and revising job and fellowship letters; and on job placement (a meeting we follow up with individual tutorials and, where desired, mock interviews). We are also offering an every-other-year seminar on revising academic writing. And EGO, in conjunction with faculty members in the department, designs, announces, promotes, and hosts an annual academic conference in the spring.

Goal e: Goal e is the dissertation, the culminating work of the PhD in English & Comparative Literature.

Goal f: Teaching is a crucial part of the PhD in English & Comparative Literature at UC, and we have an exceptionally good and thorough teacher-training program, conducted under the auspices of the Rhetoric & Composition Program, with help from the area directors and supervision by the Director of Graduate Studies. The goal is introduced both in an intensive orientation and in the first semester, secondarily in the Professionalization Seminar and primarily in the teaching practicum; it is developed further in the required Teaching College Writing seminar traditionally taken in the second semester of the first year. After that, students—here with help and supervision from the area directors and the directors both of Undergraduate Studies and Graduate Studies—design, revise, and submit for approval syllabi for undergraduate courses in their specific areas. Students teaching composition make extensive use of the advising system in place for First-Year Writing; students teaching literature, creative writing,
or upper-level composition courses are advised and assessed by faculty mentors who observe their classes, write up an account of the student instructor’s performance, and discuss that performance with the student instructor. We have also instituted courses in specialized pedagogy for those who want to enhance their teaching and build their expertise in pedagogy as an academic field: Teaching Literature and Teaching Creative Writing.

**Basic Map of the Degree**

**Year 1:**

*Professionalization Seminar (1 hour) Goal D emerging
*Teaching Practicum (2 hours) Goal F emerging
*Teaching College Writing Goal F emerging
*Workshops and Seminars appropriate to track and research emphases—the student will be advised in choosing courses by his or her assigned advisor (generally the area director in her/his field until the student identifies another mentor) or by the Director of Graduate Studies

Goals A, B, C, D, and F emerging

*Annual Assessment Meeting (Track-Specific)

At year’s end, each track will hold a meeting of faculty who have taught graduate seminars during that year. Those faculty members, using the written artifacts/portfolios of their courses as appropriate, will make individual assessments of student progress toward the learning goals (using a rubric keyed to those goals and departmental deadlines) and will report these assessments, as needed, to the student and to the Director of Graduate Studies (who can propose to the Graduate Studies Committee any needed curricular changes, clarifications, or adjustments).

Goals A, B, C, D, and F emerging

**Year 2:**

*Workshops and seminars appropriate to track and research emphases

Goals A, B, C, D, and F emerging

*Annual Track-Faculty Assessment Meeting

Goals A, B, C, D, and F emerging

*At the beginning of the spring semester, the student identifies exam areas and advisors and begins the process of devising exam lists

Goals A, B, C, D, and F developing, E emerging

**Year 3**

*Qualifying Exams (generally to be taken in January or early February)
**Goals A, B, C, D, E, and F developing**

*Dissertation committee established, work on dissertation begins*

**Goals A, B, C, D, E, and F developing**

*Annual Track-Faculty Assessment Meeting*

**Goals A, B, C, D, E, and F developing**

**Year 4**

*Dissertation completed and defended*

**Goals A, B, C, D, E, and F achieved**

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**Gathering and Using Information about Student Achievement of Goals**

The department tracks graduates’ employment and placement.

The department tracks students’ publications, presentations, prizes, and other distinctions.

One track, Rhetoric & Composition, has a formal meeting at the end of every year to discuss individual students’ progress and to reassess, where necessary, the track’s requirements and procedures.

The department has conducted occasional exit surveys of its students, and the Graduate School annually compiles data from its broader exit survey and shares it with the department.

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**Recommendations for Changes in the Assessment Procedures**

1) The department is in the process of making its tracking of graduates’ employment more systematic, and we’d like to analyze the last several years of data and move toward compiling and sharing statistics that might be useful to students and to applicants.

2) The Director of Graduate Studies will be proposing that the other PhD areas—Literature & Cultural Studies and Creative Writing—develop a plan for annual review of PhD students along the lines of Rhetoric & Composition’s, so that we can identify any potential issues as early as possible and move to remedy them. We’ll require all faculty who have taught or advised in the PhD program during the academic year to participate in the annual meetings detailed above—one for the Rhetoric & Composition program, one for Literature & Cultural Studies, and one each for Creative Writing Poetry and Creative Writing Prose—and as part of that meeting we’ll compile a brief document (keyed to Student Learning Goals) assessing each student’s progress. We’ll also look into the practicability of developing a flexible essay-grading rubric that might be usable across the variety of subdisciplines and courses in our department.
3) With the partial exception of a teacher-training seminar, there is no single course that’s common to all of our tracks, so a curriculum map is impossible. We can key our annual intra-program assessments to learning outcomes and wider departmental goals, however, and the Graduate Director, with administrative help from the Graduate Coordinator and with aid and support from faculty area directors in Literature & Cultural Studies, Rhetoric & Composition, and Creative Writing, can share around the results and consult with faculty to make sure all areas are assessing their students according to shared and congruent standards.

4) Beginning this year, the department will ask each graduating PhD to complete and turn in a brief exit survey. We hope the responses to this simple survey will help us identify ways in which we can improve the program: our curriculum; our advising; our expectations; our administrative structure or function; our efforts to build and maintain a healthy and happy community of students; issues specific to individual tracks; etc. We’ll keep these surveys on file, and the Director of Graduate Studies will report annually on the results to the Graduate Studies Committee and the Department Head, with an eye toward making any necessary adjustments or improvements.