Graduate Assessment: Comparative Literature

Comparative Literature at Cornell is a highly selective, interdisciplinary Ph.D. program. Students receiving the degree go on to teach in a variety of different academic departments or to pursue work in a variety of creative fields. We value a diversity of approaches and concentrations in our admissions process. Therefore, it is rare that any two students will follow the same paths in their choice of courses, composition of Special Committee, or areas of expertise. Moreover, it is impossible to generalize about what makes a successful Comparative Literature Ph.D. Indeed, one of the features that distinguishes Comparative Literature from other humanities or literature/language degrees in general is that there are few academic positions for assistant professors designated as purely “Comparative Literature”. Rather, many comparatists find teaching positions in national foreign language departments, in English, film and media studies, critical theory, area studies or world literature and culture departments.

The ideal candidate for admission into our Ph.D. program is someone with background in several languages (or national traditions), a strong interest in some aspects of literary and cultural theory, and an ability to be self-directed. Particularly because we have no required courses and each student chooses her own path, the Special Committee plays a central role.

Learning Goals: At the end of our program, students will have developed the following:

1. broad knowledge of methods of literary and cultural analysis
2. in-depth knowledge of a particular methodology or area of criticism
3. in-depth knowledge of literary/cultural traditions in at least one national linguistic tradition/genre/cultural practice
4. knowledge of literary/cultural traditions at least one second national linguistic tradition/genre/cultural practice
5. ability to undertake advanced research in chosen fields of study (this may include archival work with original materials such as rare books and manuscripts; popular cultural artefacts; bibliographic skills)
6. ability to develop original conclusions in writing
7. ability to articulate the importance/originality of work
8. ability to recognize and evaluate key problems in the field
9. ability to be an effective teacher of literary/cultural texts to undergraduates AND/OR ability to teach a foreign language
10. ability to complete a lengthy and original dissertation that includes in-depth research and makes original conclusions

Measures:
1. **Course work.** Students choose their courses in consultation with the DGS and Special Committee. Most courses require a lengthy seminar paper and oral presentations or interventions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
2. **Second-year review.** Undertaken in the third semester this review includes several elements: Students prepare a self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, a statement of goals, a list of courses taken, and a lengthy essay, all discussed at an oral presentation with the entire Special Committee. The paper may not necessarily be a precursor to the dissertation, but it often helps orient the student toward the choice of an appropriate topic. A successful second-year review may be defined as such when the student has received substantive feedback on the paper; and has been able to identify her weaknesses and strengths to a degree that she feels confident about moving forward with the initial exploration of a dissertation topic: 5, 6, 7, 8
3. **Meetings with the SC chair at least once a semester, and, if possible, with the entire committee:** 7, 8
4. **Teaching.** Most COML students have the privilege of teaching in either the Knight Institute and/or a foreign language. In each case they are required to take the appropriate pedagogical training after which they are responsible for their own courses or sections of a larger course: 9
5. **Conference papers.** Almost all COML students give conference papers during the course of their Cornell careers. Often these papers derive from course work or work on the dissertation and faculty often help the students develop their ideas: 5, 6, 7, 8
6. **Publications.** COML students are encouraged to publish work in peer-reviewed journals at least once during their careers at Cornell, again, with faculty help: 5, 6, 7, 8
7. **Organize events.** Many students organize conferences through our graduate student-run colloquium series or through one of the other graduate-student led reading groups on campus: 8
8. **A exam.** 1, 2, 3, 5, 8
9. **B exam:** 10

**Actions:**

1. Special committee chair will keep records of student progress, to be included in the student’s file.
2. GFA keep records of all of the second-year reviews and faculty evaluate their strengths and weaknesses for future students.
3. Make certain that students have adequate teaching experience in the fields in which they are likely to teach (and not just in their ideal or chosen areas).
4. Give students the chance to present work before their peers and receive feedback on their strengths and weaknesses as public presenters and writers.
5. Encourage students to ask questions and attend lectures.
6. Survey students once a year to find out not only what they have accomplished, but also what they have been unable to accomplish and why (e.g., articles submitted that were turned down for publication, and so on)

7. Organize a departmental wiki or other electronic storage (with appropriate level of security) to include materials for future seekers of different types of jobs. Organize mock interviews and job talks for students on the academic job market.

8. Encourage students to take part in dissertation writing workshops.

9. Encourage and help students to apply for outside fellowships.

10. Keep records of alumni and their placements—this is difficult given the current state of the job market (many students have one-year positions and postdocs before they settle into some more permanent) so that we can evaluate the job market and provide feedback and contacts for current job seekers.

11. Keep website updated with information on graduate student and alumni activities.

12. Exit interviews with the DGS.