Graduate Assessment Plan: The Department of English

The Cornell Department of English is committed to diversity in terms of critical and theoretical approaches to the study of English literature. The areas of expertise professed by its faculty and explored by its graduate students represent the full spectrum of professional sub-fields, and interdisciplinary affiliations further extend the department’s intellectual and creative engagement. A distinguishing feature of the Cornell PhD program in English is its reliance on a system of Special Committees, which allows students to develop their own courses of study within a broad framework established by the department. Graduate students work closely with faculty committees to determine a highly flexible course of study, to set individually devised qualifying exams, and to determine additional work in foreign languages. This system encourages a close working relationship between professors and students, promoting freedom and flexibility in the pursuit of the graduate degree. Students in the English PhD program also receive extensive teacher training. After the first year in the program, students typically teach seminars in the university-wide First-year Writing Program, an experience which prepares them to design and teach courses in creative writing, literature, and cultural studies to a range of students, including agriculture and engineering majors as well as students in the humanities and social sciences. The combination of an individualized curriculum and rich teaching experience positions our students to be extremely competitive on the job market, and qualifies them to pursue work in a variety of creative fields.

Learning goals

When students complete the PhD they should be able to:

1. demonstrate in-depth knowledge of one major concentration in the field, and competency in one or two other minor areas of concentration, and/or interdisciplinary affiliations (for a list of concentrations and interdisciplinary affiliations, see http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/areas/).
2. demonstrate advanced research skills, including broad knowledge of a range of critical and theoretical approaches relevant to their field of research.
3. make an original and substantial contribution to the field, and produce publishable scholarship in a timely fashion.
4. communicate research findings effectively in written and spoken presentations.
5. follow ethical guidelines for work in the field.
6. demonstrate effective skills in undergraduate teaching and potential for graduate teaching.

Direct assessment of learning outcomes

1. Qualifying examinations, theses, and committee-based reports (guidelines for all examinations are posted on the department website at http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/current_students/).
   a. The “Q Exam” (or the Qualifying Examination) represents a diagnostic stage in the graduate program, designed to determine the student’s
readiness to proceed toward the Ph.D. The committee assesses the student’s progress in developing the knowledge and skills necessary for a PhD in English, and makes recommendations for further study. The exam must be completed by the fall semester of the second year. (1, 2, 4)
b. The “A Exam” (or Admission to Candidacy Examination) serves the two functions of consolidating the student’s knowledge in major and minor fields and preparing her or him to write a dissertation. A formal report is generated by the PhD committee and submitted to the DGS. The exam must be completed before the fall semester of the fourth year. (1, 2, 3, 4)
c. The dissertation prospectus measures students’ preparedness to begin working on the dissertation. After completing the A exam, each student is required to prepare a dissertation prospectus of 10-15 pages in length, which must be approved by the PhD committee. The prospectus must be completed within six months of completing the A-exam, and in no case later than the end of the fall semester of the fourth year. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
d. The “B Exam” (or Final Examination) entails a formal “defense” of the thesis, including detailed discussion of the thesis itself, together with suggestions for revision. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
e. In addition to completing formal examinations, students are required to meet every spring semester with their PhD committees to assess progress toward the degree. In turn, every fall semester, the DGS meets with the Graduate Admissions and Review Committee to assess the academic standing of every graduate student in the department. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

Professionalization: training and assessment

1. **Teaching.** Students receiving the standard tuition package will teach undergraduate courses (in the capacity of an instructor, TA, or reader). The field of English requires a carefully supervised teaching experience of at least one year for every doctoral candidate as part of the program requirements. For each teaching assignment, students are assigned faculty course-leaders, who offer guidance and support to graduate student teachers. Students are also required to take the appropriate pedagogical training through the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines before their first teaching assignment. (6)

2. **First-year colloquium.** The course is designed to introduce new PhD students to practical and theoretical aspects of graduate English studies, conducted with the help of weekly visitors from the faculty in the English department. (1, 2)

3. **Conference papers.** PhD students are encouraged to give conference papers during the course of their Cornell careers. Often these papers derive from course work or work on the dissertation, and often with the help of specializing faculty. Students may also present current work at the “EDR”
(the English Department Roundtable), which offers graduate students an opportunity to present work in an informal setting to a group of peers, to get feedback about a current project, and to learn about the work being done by colleagues. (1, 2, 3, 4)

4. **Publications.** English PhD students are encouraged to publish work in peer-reviewed journals during their careers at Cornell, often with the help and guidance of faculty members. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

5. **Organization and attendance of academic lectures and events.** Students are expected to attend lectures and to participate in the wider intellectual life of the department and university. Students also commonly participate in student-run reading groups and dissertation writing groups. Students affiliated with these groups often organize or facilitate academic conferences.

6. **Job placement.** The English department offers extensive training and guidance for students preparing to enter the job market. Faculty-appointed “placement officers,” offer individual guidance and group workshops on the preparation of dossier materials and interview strategies. Placement officers typically read and comment on the job materials of current degree candidates on the job market. The faculty also offers mock interviews and job talks for students on the market. In order further to facilitate the hiring process, the department website features a link containing websites and cv’s of graduates currently seeking academic posts ([http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/hire/](http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/hire/)). (1, 6)

### Indirect assessment of learning outcomes

1. The department tracks graduate employment and placement. List of first-time, tenure-track positions obtained within 3 years of completion is posted on the department website at [http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/placement/](http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/placement/).

2. The department posts a list of dissertation titles for degrees received in the past five years on the department website at [http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/dissertation/](http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/dissertation/).

3. The department keeps track of students’ presentations, awards, and publications.

4. The department conducts exit polls that ask graduating PhD students about their learning and the factors that influenced their learning.

### Conclusions

1. The English department already has in place copious tools for assessment of graduate student work, exams, and academic life in the department. The department website provides clear and informative guidelines for the structure of examinations and other forms of student evaluation, in a format that is readily available to faculty, current students, and prospective students.

### Recommendations for changes in the assessment process
1. Students have requested that we provide more information sessions about nonacademic job possibilities for students holding a PhD degree. We are planning on providing an information session in the spring of 2011.
2. Faculty has requested more intense dialogue across the disciplines about exam structures and outcomes. We plan to incorporate a discussion session into our yearly schedule of faculty meetings.

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