

**Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

**Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving  
Student Learning in Degree Programs**

**Unit: Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures  
Unit Head approval: Professor Mara Wade**

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**Section O: Unit Identity and Mission**

The Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is distinguished by its broad range, its long history, and its award-winning faculty. The department teaches German and Scandinavian languages, and offers courses in literary and cultural studies from the Middle Ages to the present, in historical and applied linguistics, and in film studies and critical theory.

The department provides undergraduate students with a solid training in all aspects of German and Scandinavian languages and an in-depth understanding of the cultures expressed in these languages. Through varied course offerings, students have the chance to explore the history and structure of the languages and their multifaceted use in literature, culture, and business. They gain an understanding of the significance of the German and the Scandinavian traditions, while developing their critical and analytical skills both in those languages and in English. The well-established and highly successful Austria-Illinois program provides a study-abroad opportunity in Vienna that is optimally

synchronized with departmental offerings and requirements; study abroad possibilities exist in other locations in German-speaking and in Scandinavian countries as well. Instructors in the undergraduate program have won departmental, college-wide, and campus-wide teaching, mentoring, and advising awards and are regularly highly rated on the list of teachers ranked as excellent. The course offerings are supplemented by weekly conversation groups in German and Scandinavian languages, the monthly *Deutscher Filmabend* (German Film Night), and by extracurricular events organized by the student-run *Deutschclub* (German Club). Membership in the local chapter of the national German honorary society, Delta Phi Alpha, is also possible. Students can obtain a Bachelor of Arts in one of the following tracks: German and Commercial Studies, Modern German Studies, Language and Literature, Language Studies, and Scandinavian Studies. The department offers a minor in German, and a minor in Scandinavian is scheduled for University Senate approval in May 2008. We train future high school teachers of German, and for this purpose offer a B.A.T. degree. Beginning in Fall 2009, the department will also offer a 5-year combined B.A./M.A. degree. A combined B.A.T./M.A. degree is planned for 2010.

The graduate program of the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures offers both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in German. M.A. students receive in-depth training in all areas of German culture, language, and literature. Ph.D. students specialize in literature, cultural studies, or in (applied) linguistics. They also have the option of incorporating Scandinavian languages, literatures, and cultures. The department prepares graduate students for active research and encourages their participation in professional activities such as publishing and presenting at conferences. To this end, the *Deutsches Seminar* lecture series is specifically designed as a forum for graduate student research presentations. Students are further encouraged to take advantage of the rich and interdisciplinary offerings of the university. They may supplement course work in our unit with study in other departments and programs such as the Program in Medieval Studies, the Program in Comparative Literature, the Unit for Cinema Studies, the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, the Women's Studies Program, the Program in Jewish Culture and Society, the Program in Second Language Acquisition and Teacher Education [SLATE], or the Department of Linguistics. Students can obtain minors or certificates from these various programs.

The department regularly wins funding from competitive grant programs such as the Max Kade Foundation, the Humboldt Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Program, Fulbright, and the Swedish Institute. Each spring, we host a visiting professor from Germany under the auspices of the Max Kade program, and we maintain a faculty exchange with the University of Göttingen. We have a remarkably active intellectual climate with a robust lecture series and program of regular conferences, colloquia, and symposia, at which we host a wide range of guests and speakers from Germany, Scandinavia, and the United States. All faculty pursue an active research agenda and regularly publish and present their research in major academic venues.

Our graduate students are regularly funded for study abroad during the academic year, either as part of our exchanges with German universities or under the auspices of Fulbright or the German Academic Exchange Service. They also participate in summer programs and conduct summer research at academic institutions and libraries in the U.S. and abroad. Dissertation fellowships are available through the School of Literatures, Cultures, and Linguistics as well as from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

The department provides graduate student instructors with solid pedagogical training to take on diverse teaching assignments within the curriculum, ranging from beginning to advanced levels of German and Swedish language instruction to upper-division, writing-intensive literature courses in English. Our graduate students are socialized into the college-level teaching profession through numerous opportunities to develop teaching expertise, including: graduate coursework on second language acquisition, pedagogy, and classroom-based research; TA orientations and workshops; classroom observation across various instructional levels within the undergraduate curriculum; mentored team-teaching opportunities; classroom visits by faculty; and support of participation in professional organizations. They are also involved in curricular work, assisting in test construction, course development, and program coordination. Through careful mentoring by the faculty, our graduate student instructors are guided to become self-directed and critically reflective teachers who are able to make informed pedagogical decisions within a curricular environment.

The Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures directly contributes on several significant levels to the university's mission. By teaching over eighty-five percent of our courses to non-majors and through the oldest, and arguably largest, study abroad exchange program on campus we fulfill a dual role: contributing at all levels to the greater campus strategic plan, while growing responsibly excellent undergraduate and graduate programs. More than eighty-five percent of our total instruction is provided to undergraduates, and more than eighty-one percent to non-departmental students. We make the University of Illinois a global campus, right here in real time and in local space by sending students from over thirty majors to Austria in a well-run program with an outstanding infrastructure, and bringing between thirty and forty Austrian students annually to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

### **Section I: Past Assessment Results**

The faculty in Germanic Languages and Literatures continuously assesses its students, their learning, and their performance as well as our own teaching. We do this in class, through mentoring and grading, and also when we give awards (teaching and academic accomplishment awards to graduate students, and academic accomplishment awards to undergraduates). We adjust our individual syllabi regularly based on our teaching experiences and the results we see, as well as according to the results we desire. We update textbooks and teaching methods constantly.

The unit's last plan for assessing learning outcomes was developed in fall 1998 and submitted to CTE in January 1999. No members of the committee charged with developing that plan are currently working in the unit. Of the faculty members in the unit as a whole in 1998-1999, only three are still in the unit today. All other faculty have been hired since 1999. This very high rate of turnover and the complete change in our unit's demographic structure, as well as a radical increase in numbers of students taught per faculty member, was partly responsible for the fact that several of the methods for assessing learning outcomes planned by the unit in 1998-1999 were not followed. However, the learning outcomes identified as desirable by the unit faculty in 1998-1999 do to an extent mesh with our desired and achieved outcomes today. The current unit faculty began the discussion of our program's goals and success rates afresh (see Section II.B below), and the methods and measures for assessing our progress towards achieving those goals (see Section II.C below) are well-aligned with the unit's identity and capacity today and with the needs and goals of today's students. This assessment plan has a high chance of success due to the consensual procedure used in its development, and to the solid and realistic alignment of goals and identity.

Our assessment plan will also include ongoing evaluation of our growing program in Scandinavian studies, in which a new curriculum and new study-abroad opportunities recently have been introduced. In this program, as in our German programs, enrollments are increasing across the board.

The unit recently has completed a significant restructuring of its undergraduate curricula, with the significant recent addition of combined five-year B.A./M.A. (beginning Fall 2009) and B.A.T./M.A. (planned for 2010) degree tracks. We have introduced new core courses as part of a German studies major track at the undergraduate level. We are actively engaged at present in thinking through the structure and content of our graduate programs; here, we are also taking into consideration feedback we have received from current and former students about the students' perceived needs and our program's offerings, in addition to larger developments in the field. The unit's goals for its students on all levels are high, but realistic, and our thinking is long-range. The ideas in this assessment plan will be implemented.

## **Section II: Revised Assessment Plan**

### **A. Process Used to Develop this Plan**

In fall 2007, the department Head appointed a colleague to attend various assessment-related workshops during the fall semester. This colleague informed all faculty members in the department about the information she obtained. The Head appointed an ad hoc committee (consisting of three faculty members) to develop our unit's plan during spring 2008.

Before the first faculty meeting of the spring 2008 semester, the unit's last assessment plan, developed in fall 1998 and submitted in January 1999, was distributed. Some of the

assessments deemed useful in the past were not viewed so by the current faculty due to changes in the curriculum and changes in personnel.

The assessment ad hoc committee organized a departmental retreat in January 2008 for the purpose of discussing and generating an assessment plan. The ad hoc committee prepared a questionnaire about student learning outcomes (desired and actual), which served as a starting point for our discussion at the retreat. During the retreat, the department reached a consensus about desired learning outcomes and potential tools for assessment. Faculty members worked together after the retreat to draft various sections of the unit's assessment plan, and the ad hoc committee assembled the colleagues' input and additional feedback and ideas into this document.

## **B. Student Outcomes**

### **B.1: Desired Student Outcomes: Undergraduate Program**

A. *Language ability*: Students develop and improve their language abilities, i.e., their ability to read, speak, write, and listen in English, German, and a modern Scandinavian language. In addition to these four modalities, students also develop and improve their ability to work with texts in a different language/from a different culture.

B. *Cultural literacy*: Students develop and improve their ability to function in a non-native cultural and linguistic context as well as an ability to work with texts in a different language/from a different culture. Students can recognize cultural differences and similarities and embrace them. That is, students develop cultural competence in a globalized world.

C. *Analytical and argumentative skills*: Students develop and improve their abilities to analyze texts representing different genres and develop and improve their abilities in argumentation. Students hone their critical thinking and discursive skills (the real domains of the humanities) by distinguishing between opinions, facts, analysis, and argument.

D. *Factual Knowledge*: Students are introduced to the different fields within German and/or Scandinavian studies. They are familiar with the key writers, texts, and figures and their historical contexts as well as with the linguistic realities within the target cultures.

E. *Writing development*: Students are able to produce well-written academic texts in German, Swedish, and English. In their writing, they display an awareness of audience and an understanding of how textual choices reflect coherent argumentation. Students know how to conduct research and understand the value of multiple draft-writing.

## **B.2: Desired Student Outcomes: Graduate Program**

### **M.A. Students**

The desired learning outcomes for graduates at the M.A. level are the same as for undergraduates, with the addition of the points below:

- Students have the ability to function linguistically, culturally, and analytically at a higher level than our undergraduate students.
- Students have refined their research abilities.
- Students have a solid overview and broad knowledge base of the field. They develop an awareness of different identities/possibilities within the field(s). (Students need to have an area of particular interest at the time of the M.A. examination, but need to use the time toward the M.A. degree primarily to build advanced general competence in German studies, since most of the time between the achievement of the M.A. degree and an eventual doctoral degree will be spent working in the field of specialization.)
- Students understand that what constitutes “knowledge” in their field(s) is not constant, but ever-emerging and changing.
- Students begin to be excited about research and to pose their own research questions.
- Students understand the ethical obligations in conducting research.
- Students begin to be able to sustain an argument at length and rigorously.
- Students exhibit excitement about teaching, and a good basic teaching ability. They are also interested in consulting research on teaching and research on learning in order to hone their skills as teachers.
- Students exhibit an understanding of professional issues (e.g., professional conduct within the department, recognition of professional organizations and their activities, recognition of the importance of attending lectures on campus).

### **Ph.D. Students**

The desired learning outcomes for graduate students at the Ph.D. level are the same as for M.A. students, with the addition of the points below:

- Students have the ability to function linguistically, culturally, and analytically at a higher level than our M.A. students. Students actively seek out opportunities to hone these skills.
- Students develop the ability to situate themselves within the various discourses present in the field. That is, they have a sense of themselves as scholars and they develop a scholarly identity while still maintaining awareness of other identities.
- Students are excited about research and pose their own research questions.
- Students are able to sustain an argument at length and rigorously.
- Students build a scholarly self-narrative rather than a list of completed courses.
- Students recognize the worth of attending conferences, lectures, workshops, and of seeking out a wide set of mentors in both teaching and research.

- Students will be aware of academic realities, including workings of the job market, tenure, and alternative career options.
- Students are aware of what is involved in preparing a paper for conference presentation and in writing for scholarly publication, and they are socialized into participating in this process through their participation in the *Deutsches Seminar* series (our graduate student lecture forum) and through their course work.
- Students have grown as teachers and have become reflective practitioners: their teaching is informed by research on teaching and learning, and they continue to expand their knowledge in these domains.
- Students have a varied teaching portfolio and have participated in course design and curricular development.

### **C. Measures and Methods for Assessing Outcomes in Both the Undergraduate and Graduate Programs**

In the following, the department proposes a number of assessment tools and procedures for studying learning outcomes. The principal aim of these procedures is to develop a systematic approach to assessment that will allow the department to make assessment into a permanent option. According to this vision, the department will collect certain data primarily from students (undergraduate and graduate), but also from alumni and faculty that will help the department to understand to what extent it is successful in implementing its goals and supporting its values. Our thinking is that the results of these assessment procedures will be primarily statistical, available online, and easy to access.

We believe that it is most logical to implement assessment procedures at certain points in the program; for instance: during the teaching of GER 211; GER 420; and immediately after the awarding of the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. However, as we note below, additional instructional turning points may also be desirable to examine. Like the German program, the Scandinavian program is continually assessed in an informal manner. The Department will look into the question of whether it would like to implement similar assessment procedures for the Scandinavian sections of the curriculum in the future.

#### **C.1: Principles to Guide the Assessment Procedure**

The department sees the following principles as important in guiding its assessment process:

- Materials to be used in assessment should be relatively easy to collect and interpret. They should, whenever possible, be conducted and be stored in electronic format.
- Assessment procedures chosen should be sustainable and draw, whenever possible, upon existing departmental resources.
- Assessment tools should reflect our department's values and goals toward undergraduate and graduate education.

- Assessment should be relevant and effective: it should measure what the department wants or needs it to measure.
- Learning outcomes should reflect perspectives of key stakeholders, i.e., past and current students from the undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as current instructors of these programs.

## **C.2. Assessment Methods, Tools, and Procedures**

Assessment procedures should consider students' perception of their learning (e.g., through questionnaires), as well as strive to collect evidence of students' actual learning (e.g., analysis of student production, DMI figures, etc.).

Our unit will use the following tools for tapping into perceptions and production of student learning outcomes:

**C.2.1. Online Questionnaires** to alumni, outgoing students, and current students to understand their perspective of their learning.

- What will these look like? Online questionnaires can be conducted through Webtools or other university resources. Likert-scale questions will be developed to find out, for example: (1) what students learned through our program; (2) important course offerings that contributed to students' education and professional and/or personal goals; and (3) students' current experiences (including study-abroad participation, their employment success after graduation and/or admission to graduate or relevant professional programs, etc.). The questionnaires can also address self-assessment of students' abilities and knowledge. Information about awards, grants, and fellowships received will be collected on these questionnaires as well. From graduate students, information can be collected about publications, conference or workshop presentations, certificates earned in other programs, academic events attended, and participation in the *Deutsches Seminar* series.
- How will the tool help us understand learning outcomes? It will allow us to better understand student perceptions of learning. The questionnaires will be sent out once a year and stored on a shared electronic folder.
- Questions we will consider in future meetings focused on assessment (see Section III.B below) include: How often will the questionnaires be analyzed (i.e., annually? Every 2 or 3 years?) Who will examine the data? How will the data be used by the faculty?

**C.2.2. Analysis of Student Production** to provide a less subjective, more "independent" view of students' learning outcomes. Though not directly related to the assessment project, analysis of student work could contribute to the field of applied linguistics in looking at advanced levels of language use within FL curricular environments and longitudinally. It could also provide our graduate students with opportunities to work with applied linguistics research situated within an educational environment.

- What will this look like? Language abilities and cultural literacy are two areas that will be analyzed and reported on (both internally in the department, and externally in

the form of research) through analysis of student writing. (Student writing will be easier to collect and analyze than student speaking.)

- How will the tool help us understand learning outcomes? In terms of language abilities, analysis will look at broad issues of syntactic and lexical complexity, or could look at more specific areas of linguistic competence, e.g., modality, attitude and stance. In terms of cultural literacy, analysis looks to current frameworks for assessing intercultural communicative competence. The writing prompts (and the pedagogy leading up to them) will also be examined to see how instruction promotes student writing.
- Questions we will consider in future meetings focused on assessment (see Section III.A and B below) include: What are the key instructional turning points within the undergraduate program about which the department would want information? Will we want to look at first or final drafts, or both? What are the proto-typical writing tasks of key courses – in other words, which writing assignments represent best what students learn by the end of the course?

**C.2.3. DMI Figures**, including information on course enrollments, retention rates, student composition (e.g., who is being taught in the undergraduate population: majors and non-majors, College of Liberal Arts and Science students, and students from other colleges), numbers of course sections, and the results of teaching evaluations.

### **Section III: Plans for Using Results**

#### **A. Plan for Implementing this Assessment Process and for Using Results for Program Improvement**

To ensure regular and consistent evaluation of learning outcomes in the department over the six-year assessment period, the department will hold an annual faculty meeting at the end of the academic year in which analysis of assessment procedures used will be disseminated and discussed.

The goal of each annual faculty meeting is to engender dialogue among faculty members about student learning outcomes and to have the department consider, and eventually act upon, ways in which it can improve its program. At the meeting, faculty members will make short presentations on given assessment areas (e.g., alumni questionnaires, senior questionnaires, DMI figures, writing analysis), followed by time for open discussion among the entire group. The short presentations will address findings and interpretations of the assessment instrument used (e.g., questionnaires), and/or provide an update on larger assessment projects (e.g., analysis of student writing). Short reports accompanying each presentation will provide written documentation of the assessment tools and learning outcomes garnered from them. By the end of the meeting, departmental

members will have reached general consensus about areas of strengths and weaknesses in the program.

The assessment efforts of our unit will be limited by our lack of faculty and staff support. With our current need to hire at least two additional faculty members, and the fact that we have only 50% support from one staff assistant, Germanic Languages and Literatures will be physically unable to conduct as much assessment as we desire. We will still, for instance, need to discuss in depth at our meetings in academic year 2008-2009 (see schedule in Section III.B below) the feasibility of and extent to which Point II.C.2.2 (Analysis of Student Production, above) can be implemented.

We are strongly in favor of assessment and fully understand its potential advantages for our students and the unit as a whole. We will not only implement this plan, but will also think seriously about how some of the assessment activities could feed into future faculty and graduate student research and publications. However, it is unrealistic to expect Germanic Languages and Literatures to conduct assessment with the depth and rigor of, for instance, much larger units, which can devote considerable staff support and time to such a project. Our department is being asked to assess at a level similar to large units, but without comparable faculty depth and staff support.

## **B. Timeline for Implementation of Results**

During the **first year** of the assessment project, assessment areas will be explored in order: (a) to pilot the assessment tools and ensure that the instruments are adequately addressing the department's assessment needs; and (b) to provide a baseline of learning outcomes and practices for the department so as to understand ongoing data collected.

Certain assessment tools (e.g., analysis of student production,) that require more time for analysis will be analyzed and disseminated at the end of the **third** and **sixth** years of the assessment project.

### **Fall 2008**

Department establishes committees for assessment projects  
Committees develop assessment procedures

### **Spring 2009**

Committees administer assessment procedures  
Committees analyze (to the extent that is possible) and report on assessment at faculty meeting  
Department discusses efficacy of assessment tools and learning outcomes

### **Fall 2009 – Spring 2010**

Committees refine/revisit assessment procedures  
Committees administer assessment procedures

Committees analyze and report on assessment at faculty meeting  
Department discusses learning outcomes

**Fall 2010 – Spring 2011**

Committees administer assessment procedures  
Committees analyze and report on assessment at faculty meeting  
Department discusses learning outcomes