

Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures German Studies Assessment Narrative, 2017 KU Degree-Level Assessment Award

INTRODUCTION

This document aims to demonstrate our commitment to using degree-level assessment to improve student learning in the German Studies program. While we have found it necessary to change our method so that assessment for this purpose remains reasonably manageable in our small department, we continue to collect data that informs discussions on student learning.

Degree-level assessment in the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures should be viewed within the broader context of many steps we take to build and maintain an undergraduate program that effectively engages and educates our students. We are currently in the fourth year of our new German Studies curriculum; this May we will have the first group of graduates who started at KU with our new degree requirements. We use degree-level assessment, which was implemented at about the same time as our new curriculum, to help us monitor and improve two significant and new or revised elements of our curriculum: the two gateway courses to the major (GERM 301 and 301: High Intermediate German I and II) and our senior capstone course (GERM 580: German-Speaking Europe Today). Assessment has also helped us create a departmental culture in which curricular-related matters, teaching, and student learning are regularly discussed in the Undergraduate Studies Committee and in the department.

NEW GERMAN STUDIES CURRICULUM

In fall 2013 we implemented a German Studies undergraduate curriculum that moved away from the traditional language & literature model that had been in place for decades. Our new major aims to give students a relevant, diverse, and challenging program in the language and cultural forms of German-speaking Europe, including literature, the arts, history, business, and politics. The major allows for interdisciplinary flexibility: up to 2 courses taught outside the department but with significant content related to German-speaking Europe can count toward the major.

The curricular changes we made were informed by reports from the Modern Language Association, American Association of Teachers of German, and German Studies Association; participation in a workshop with the MLA Language Consultancy Working Group (2012); a review of German Studies programs at other institutions; a review of undergraduate programs at KU; enrollment data provided by the College; and informal discussions with dozens of students.

Curricular changes included deleting outdated courses, adding new courses, and revising existing course titles, numbers, descriptions, and prerequisites. We also:

- refocused major coursework on 300-, 400-, and 500-level courses; 600- and 700-level courses are no longer required for major
- developed a more clearly defined sequence of courses at the high intermediate and advanced levels (GERM 301, 302, 401, 402, 501) to ensure a logical and continuous development of skills and knowledge
- developed a more clearly defined set of prerequisites to ensure that our students would acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the next course in the major
- improved articulation between courses offered in our summer language institutes in Germany and our German Studies curriculum

- created a capstone course for majors (first offered in spring 2014)
- secured KU Core status for several courses in the major for G4 LO2 and G6
- redesigned requirements for Departmental Honors

To give one detailed example of our efforts to improve student learning: Prior to this major overhaul of our curriculum, we had three equivalents (of sorts) for our current GERM 301 and 302: GERM 340, 344, and 348. Our majors were required to take two of the three courses, but the courses could be taken in any order, and they could be taken on campus or in one of our summer study abroad programs. There was little if any articulation among the courses and little if any coordination among instructors. We recognized that we could not expect our students to succeed in any of these courses, let alone in a 400-level course, if we did not ensure that they were moving through their major in a clearly defined sequential manner that allowed them to acquire the skills and knowledge they would need to succeed in the next course. Our solution: we now have two courses, GERM 301 and 302, which are both required and must be taken in order and which serve as the prerequisites for most upper-level courses. In conjunction with concerted efforts to improve how these courses are taught and what content is taught (with a close eye on Core Goal 4, Learning Outcome 2), this restructuring is having a positive impact on our students' learning experience.

When we implemented our German Studies curriculum, we also committed to improving our advising, mentoring, and co-curricular opportunities. We understand that enhancing student learning requires ongoing commitment. We make more effort now to connect our students with valuable campus resources such as the Spencer Museum of Art and the Undergraduate Career Center. We are currently working with the Center for Undergraduate Research and KU Libraries to scaffold the acquisition of research skills across our major, and we work closely with the Office of Study Abroad to promote summer, semester, and year-long programs in German-speaking Europe. Our faculty also take advantage of campus resources with the aim of improving our majors' learning experience. Mr. Jim Morrison is working this semester with a CUR Graduate Research Consultant to revise the research component of his 400-level course on German business culture, for example, and Professor Vanchena is participating in a CUR faculty working group on capstone courses.

We do not have assessment data from the years prior to our German Studies curriculum. The degree-level assessment we have conducted in recent years, however, both confirms that our students are meeting expectations for learning outcomes and suggests ways we can help more of them meet and exceed expectations. This data on student learning becomes particularly helpful when considered in conjunction with data on the number of German Studies majors and minors, of students spending a semester or year abroad, and of students acquiring research skills in their classes or while conducting independent projects—all of which are generally increasing.

DEGREE-LEVEL ASSESSMENT

As stated above, we take a two-pronged approach to assessment by tracking learning outcomes in both our Senior Capstone course (GERM 580) and our high-intermediate sequence (GERM 301 and 302). Each of these courses is in the KU Core, so there is some overlap in the outcomes we assess. For degree-level assessment purposes, we assess one of three learning outcomes per course each semester, collecting data over time.

We are a small department with a limited number of faculty who are involved with the assessment process, so the data collection and analysis process must be manageable. Initially, we found the Blackboard Outcomes module an attractive option for conducting degree-level assessment and combining it with the assessment of Core courses. The three courses included in our current assessment plan are Blackboard-based, with rubrics for relevant assignments.

We participated in the pilot phase of the Blackboard Outcomes module, working closely with the KU Blackboard team and a senior consulting specialist from Blackboard Education Services. We decided to use the Blackboard Outcome module in part because it allowed us, with behind-the-screen help from the KU team, to collect data from two years. We were thus able to generate more baseline assessment data at the start of degree-level assessment.

Our initial efforts were ambitious. We conducted secondary assessment using rubrics different from those used to grade the assignments in class, and we used two or three faculty assessors, at least one of whom had not taught the course, and each of whom assessed all of the submissions for any particular assignment. Again, this had the advantage of allowing us to collect a fair amount of baseline data that then informed our initial discussions of student learning in GERM 301, 302, and 580. It also gave us the opportunity to think more about these critical courses themselves, which has been important during this early phase of our new curriculum.

We soon realized, however, that this thorough approach, while ideal, was prohibitively time-consuming. We changed our approach. Instead of using the Blackboard Outcomes module, we now generate data and graphics using the “Rubric Evaluation Report” option available in the Blackboard grade center. This does not require assistance from the Blackboard team, so we can be more flexible when scheduling our efforts. Furthermore, we now conduct primary assessment: we each assess a given assignment in our own course only, which saves each assessor a significant amount of time. Our next step: to create or revise a single rubric that can be used for grading a particular assignment for class, degree-level assessment, and Core recertification purposes. Our ultimate goal is to streamline the process and expand the number of colleagues able to use Blackboard for assessing assignments, so that we can return to having at least two colleagues assess each assignment.

As indicated in our annual reports, we are using degree-level assessment to improve student learning. The process prompts faculty to reflect collectively on course content and teaching methodology, for example, and to consider and implement changes informed by our data. We have had conversations about being more aware of how we present information to our students and how we can best structure assignments to help students not only acquire the skills, knowledge, and practice they need to attain the desired outcomes but also to help them acquire the ability to demonstrate that they have done so.

The data we collected prompted us, in GERM 301 and 302, to schedule more class time for vocabulary building and to add pre-writing activities and post-writing discussions to the course schedule. Students have responded positively to these changes, and we have observed some improvement in the students’ performance on the essay assignment we assess. We expect future assessment data to confirm these observations. Data from our capstone course, GERM 580, has

been less helpful because of the relatively small number of students who took the course. Enrollment this spring is higher, so data we collect should be more helpful. Changes being made this semester are thus informed less by degree-level assessment and more by insights gained from the CUR faculty working group on capstone courses. One new element: as part of the course, students will submit an abstract and present their research at the Center for Undergraduate Research annual symposium. Moreover, some course content will be flipped so that class time focuses on students' active engagement with the material. We expect these changes to generate discussion about how we assess student learning in our capstone course.