As part of the on-going assessment process the Anthropology Program undertook a thorough review of the First Exam in the Fall Semester of 2013

The first exam in anthropology assesses progress towards program learning goals 1 and 8:
1) appreciation of the history and breadth of knowledge in one of the subfields of anthropology; and
8) ability to convey knowledge clearly in oral and written forms.

The first exam both assesses student understanding of material covered in required core courses and is a learning device itself that insures students have command of foundational material possibly beyond course material. The First Exam learning goals are thus to foster students’
   A) command of the essential history of knowledge in a student’s chosen subfield
   B) appreciation of the range of accepted specialized knowledge in the chosen subfield
   C) abilities to communicate knowledge in written and oral forms.

The First Exam is distinctive for each subfield of the program (Archaeology, Cultural Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology and Physical Anthropology). Because the faculties in Linguistic Anthropology, Archeology and Physical Anthropology are small enough to prepare and evaluate the exams as committees of the whole, and because they are also the faculty who teach the courses that prepare students for the exam, the regular construction and evaluation of the exam amounts to an annual assessment review of the exam. In addition, for this special assessment effort feedback was solicited from the last three cohorts of students to take the exam. Across these three subfields it was agreed that the exams as currently constituted are reliable indicators of student progress toward program learning goals as well as helpful pedagogical tools No adjustment was recommended.

Given the size of the Cultural Anthropology subfield, in both number of students and number of faculty, a special review process was needed. The Executive Officer called a general open meeting with students in Cultural Anthropology and representatives of the First Exam Subcommittee for Cultural Anthropology to solicit broad student input. This took place on November 1, 2013. He then convened a meeting of Cultural Anthropology faculty on November 8, 2013 to discuss the concerns raised by students, as well as any concerns faculty might have regarding the exam. Simultaneously, student representatives on the subcommittee conducted an on-line survey of students to solicit broader and more detailed input into issues raised at the student meeting. The information from all these sources was then considered collectively at a meeting of the First Exam Subcommittee for Cultural Anthropology.

After significant deliberation, the committee recommended adjusting the current exam procedure in Cultural Anthropology in a couple ways that address recurrent concerns elicited by the review process. The first major modification is that students will now receive the exam questions the
Friday before the exam. This will amount to 2-4 days advance notice (the target days are Monday and Wednesday but it sometimes has to be adjusted to room availability). It is hoped that this will reduce the anxiety generated by uncertainty about the questions, and allow students to deploy the material they have been studying more effectively since they will be able to decide in advance which questions they will answer with which material (making it easier to avoid repetition). This should also alleviate some of the time pressure since students will not need to spend exam time deciding between multiple question options and perhaps outlining unanticipated responses.

In addition, the committee recommended permitting students to have a collective exam bibliography for reference during the exam. The bibliography, which the students will be responsible for constructing as part of their study effort, may include all standard citation information but no annotation. This will allow students to deploy the time they previously spent memorizing such details to studying more broadly and substantively, while hopefully reducing the experience of remediation associated with rote learning.

The committee confirmed support for a regular mechanism to solicit student feedback on the first-year required courses covered by the exam, which the student representatives subsequently developed. This data will figure into subsequent review efforts. It was also agreed that representatives of the First Exam Subcommittee for Cultural Anthropology should meet with first-year students in the fall semester to address questions about the exam objectives and structure earlier in the process than currently done (at the end of the spring semester).

These recommendations will be implemented with the First Exam in Cultural Anthropology scheduled for August 2014.
In addition to its role as an assessment tool for general program learning goals, the Second Exam in anthropology also has specific learning goals. The following are the learning goals of the Second Exam:

A. To ensure that students working outside laboratories have extensive knowledge of the place(s) in which they will conduct their research, as evident in their ability to identify, summarize, and assess the significance of literature dealing with major issues in the anthropology and broader historical, political, and economic context of that geographic area.

B. To ensure that students are conversant in the literature concerning broad topical areas from which they draw their specific research problem. They must be able to identify key debates concerning the topic(s) and connect it with ancillary literatures, construct an exhaustive bibliography on the topic(s), and successfully position their research problem within that literature so as to advance knowledge in it.

C. To ensure that students can design a proposal for a program of research, demonstrating mastery of the literature relevant to a specific problem and of appropriate methods for examining it.

D. To help students develop their ability to orally communicate their specialized knowledge.

To assess the second exam, the results of all second exams over the last 4 semesters (Spring 2012-Fall 2013) were compiled and examined. Over this time 41 students took their second exam. Of these 10 passed with distinction, 27 passed, and 4 passed after fulfilling conditions (in all cases the condition involved revising the dissertation proposal). No student failed the exam or was asked to retake it. This was considered to be an indication that the exam is largely achieving the intended learning goals.

To further assess the exam we convened faculty who had participated on second examination committees over the last two years to discuss any concerns. Various issues were brought up. The only recurrent issue was from faculty in cultural anthropology who were concerned about a lack of clarity in terms of what constitutes an appropriate geographical area and topic for the exam. In order to redress this, the program instituted a new “Second Exam Approval Form” for cultural anthropology students which must to be submitted for EO approval at least 6 months prior to the date of the second exam. This form specifies the intended specialties of the exam and facilitates discussion between the advisor, the student, and the EO to ensure that the defined areas and specialties match the learning goals of the exam and program. This also ensures that students start planning for the exam enough in advance to allow for adequate preparation.

It became clear in the assessment discussion that we lacked data on the range of exam performances deemed “passable.” In order to have more data for subsequence assessments, we instituted a “Second Exam Report” form, which formalizes the exam results, but also asks the committee to report any concerns or issues about the student’s performance that were not serious enough to require conditions. The report forms will be collected and reviewed as part of the next assessment cycle.