The Second Examination for Students on the Philology Track

The relevant learning goals:

“The second exam demonstrates that the student has achieved parts two and three of the Program’s goals: “mastery of the literature and civilization of the Greco-Roman world.” It is given in three parts: a written examination in ancient history, an oral examination in the history of Greek literature, and an oral examination in the history of Latin literature. These may be taken in any order. The ancient history examination, composed by two examiners and graded by two others, is given twice a year; the oral examinations are each administered by a panel of three faculty members. For each of the three exams, the student will choose in advance a special topic and work on that topic with a faculty advisor who is also one of the examiners. A portion of the exam addresses the special topic, while the remainder is grounded in general knowledge. Students will prepare for the general knowledge portion of the oral examinations using a reading list posted on the Program’s website. Students who fails any part of the Second Examination may take it again, but if it is failed a second time, they must petition the Program’s Executive Committee for the right to take it a third time.”

The process of evaluation

An analysis of the three parts of the second exam for philology students was begun by the Curriculum and Examination Committee, including its student members, but the whole Classics faculty was involved in the discussions and approved all of the recommendations for change in meetings on March 9, 2012 and May 11, 2012. Changes in the history exam for philologists were proposed by the Ad Hoc Committee on ancient History on June 12, 2012 and approved by the entire faculty at its meeting on Sept. 14, 2012.

Since our student body is very small, it seemed pointless to collect statistics. Every faculty member had participated in grading past exams, so we all had a sense of the quality of the student’s performance, as well as the level of knowledge it represented. The student representatives spoke from their own experience and that of their peers.

Issues

It was agreed that the History Exam needed a complete overhaul. The original format included a set of identifications selected from a list of several hundred given to the students in advance, two essays on general issues without any limitations, and one on a special topic. The exam was difficult to administer and all agreed that it was not an accurate test of the students’ understanding of ancient history. In addition, it took far too long for the students to prepare for it, and left them in a state of high anxiety.
There was more satisfaction with the two oral exams, though the students’ reliance on the reading lists of ancient texts designed for the level one translation exams often limited their general knowledge of ancient authors and texts. For example, students read book 1 of Plato’s *Republic* in Greek in preparation for the translation exams, but should be able to answer questions about the whole *Republic* on the oral exam. From the students’ perspective there was not enough guidance about what would be covered and how to prepare.

**Changes**

To remedy the problems noted above, the format of the History Exam for Philology Students was completely changed. The identifications, essays, and special topics were replaced by a set of 16 broad topics divided into four sections covering Greece, the Hellenistic East, the Roman Republic and the Roman Principate. The students will be given the topics to prepare in advance together with a reading list to guide their preparation. In process of studying for the exams we hope that they will acquire a broad knowledge of Greco-Roman history which supplements and systematizes what they have learned in class. For the exam itself students will be presented with two questions in each of the four areas and are asked to write on one question in three of the areas. The exam guidelines and reading lists have been posted on-line, but not the topics themselves, which will be changed on a rotating basis. Students can obtain the topics for any given semester on request at the Program office.

To assist the students in preparing for the oral exams in Greek and Roman Literature, new reading lists were prepared especially for this purpose and posted on line along with new, detailed guidance about how to prepare for them. The special topics, which often reflect the students’ research interests, will be retained.

**Next steps to be taken**

All of these changes have already been approved by the whole faculty and put into place. The first students to benefit from them will be taking oral exams this spring and the written history exam at the end of August. The Curriculum and Exam Committee will carefully analyze the results and one year from now will be in a position to determine whether the changes were beneficial.

Submitted by Prof. Dee L. Clayman, Executive Officer