Assessment Report – PhD and MA Programs in Classics

March 1, 2019

1. This year the PhD and MA Programs in Classics assessed the First Exam. This exam is in two parts, a written exam consisting of six passages of Greek (3 prose and 3 Poetry) from which the student selects four to translate into idiomatic English. The second part is a similar exam taken in Latin. PhD students must pass both parts which they can take in any order; MA students must take either the Latin or Greek exam. PhD students generally take the exams after 4 semesters in the program or earlier if they enter with an MA degree. MA students also take it in their 4th semester which is at the conclusion of their 2-year program. The exams are written by a rotating selection of two faculty and graded by two other faculty on a pass/fail basis. Passages are selected from a reading list posted on the Program’s website along with a description of the exam.

2. For the PhD students, a passing grade on the 1st exam is evidence of success in Program Learning Outcomes #1: “Mastery of the languages, literatures and civilization of the Greco-Roman world;” and #3: “Capacity to read Greek and/or Latin texts with precisions and nuance.” These correspond to Institutional Outcomes #1: “Broad and specialized knowledge in their discipline” and #2: “Oral and written communication skills, other skills and experience appropriate to the discipline as required for career success.” For the MA students a passing grade on a translation exam is evidence of success in Program Learning Outcomes #1 “A Knowledge of either Latin or Greek appropriate for the MA.” This corresponds to Institution Outcomes #2: “Advanced oral and written communication skills in their discipline” and #3: “Professional skills and experience required for career success.”

3. This year the assessment was conducted by the Program’s Executive Committee including its student members. We wanted to determine whether the changes made after the last assessment in 2016 made a difference. Evidence of successful attainment of the learning goals is the passing rate of the exams. When the passing rate for PhD students from 2016-2018 (90%) was compared with the passing rates for 2010-2015 (85%), it is clear that there has been some improvement.1 We believe that this can be directly attributed to changes made by the program following the assessment of 2016.

4. Following its initial assessment of the passing rate for 2010-2015 the Committee on Curriculum and Examinations made a recommendation that students who failed a part of the exam be required to retake it the next time it was offered after filing a detailed plan of study that was approved by the Executive Committee. Students who failed a second time would be asked to leave the program. In previous years students could retake a failed exam without specific approval and only had to file a study plan after a second failure. This policy led to delays in student progress through the program and did not always have positive outcomes. Since the change only one student failed the Greek exam. The student filed an acceptable study plan in a timely way and passed the exam at the very next opportunity.

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1 No MA student took a translation exam in 2016-18.
In addition to policy, the Curriculum and Examination Committee also reviewed the reading list on which the exam is based and made some changes to reduce the number of titles. Although the number of pages is roughly the same, the list now appears somewhat less daunting.

In the same assessment cycle, the students discussed the first exam at their meeting with the Executive Committee on Dec. 16, 2016. They had two suggestions. The first was that students be required to take at least one of the translation exams at the end of their first two semesters. This was subsequently rejected by the faculty because students enter the program with very different levels of language preparation and some would not be ready for the exam after only two semesters of graduate work. The other suggestion was that faculty include sight reading exercises in their courses. This suggestion could not be implemented as proposed because two-thirds of our courses are taught at NYU and Fordham where it is not possible for us to influence either syllabi or pedagogy. As a solution a decision was made to offer one-credit sight reading workshops at the Graduate Center. Workshops were offered in sight reading Greek in the spring of 2017 and in Latin in the spring of 2018. Both were well enrolled not only with CUNY students, but NYU and Fordham students as well. Informal polls indicate that the workshops give the students more confidence in their ability to do well on the exams which they schedule as soon after the workshops as possible.

5. The assessment of the first Exam in 2016 lead to changes in policy, curriculum and the reading list that increased the passing rate and student confidence. Increasing the passing rate, in turn, accelerates student progress through the program. In the future it would be valuable to continue monitoring the passing rate and to continue offering the sight translation workshops.

6. Next steps would include re-assessing the second exam to determine whether the process could be more efficient.