Learning goals: Dissertation

Students who complete the dissertation will be able:

1. to produce a scholarly work that analyzes a set of literary and cultural texts with originality and precision, and that engages theories and methodologies relevant to the aims of the project.

2. to produce a scholarly work that engages responsibly with relevant scholarship, that acknowledges indebtedness to the work of others, and that demonstrates familiarity with professional protocols of citation.

3. to produce a scholarly work of sufficient originality, substance, and persuasiveness to merit publication in part or whole.

4. to produce a scholarly work that demonstrates specialized competence in the primary and secondary literature of a particular field and that contributes to the development of knowledge of that field.

Assessment Process

Our assessment process took place over the Fall 2012 and early Spring 2013 semesters. The Curriculum Committee had a series of conversations about the dissertation process, focusing on the learning goals and the dissertation guidelines detailed in the Practical Guide to the English Program. We also surveyed our alumni from 2008-2012 (of the 133 students we surveyed, 59 responded). We asked them about their job placements, publication records, plans for future publication, rapport with their supervisors and committees, and their opinions about our dissertation policies and procedures. We also had discussions in three separate Executive Committee meetings over two semesters.

On December 14th 2012, we had an open meeting of the program where we discussed the results of the alumni survey and the ongoing conversations taking place in the Curriculum and Executive Committees. Many current students and faculty shared their experiences of the dissertation process, which helped us think through proposed changes in policies and procedures (and also gave us a chance to clarify aspects of our existing policies with current students).

To account for our student’s progress on the job market—which is of course related to the success of their dissertational work—we updated our placement statistics to the best of our ability and included them as Appendix II of this document.
Efficacy of Assessment Process

We found the assessment process for the dissertation helpful and effective. Our learning goals for the dissertation stress the quality of scholarship and its capacity to contribute to a scholarly field. It was therefore helpful to get a sense of how many students are publishing their dissertations, in whole or in part; those results are represented in Appendix I. Many members of the faculty, administrative team and student body participated in discussions about how to fine-tune our current dissertation process. We were particularly happy to have a productive open meeting of the program; we recommend such a meeting to any program assessing their dissertation process.

Proposed Changes:

The learning goals for the dissertation seem to work well. At our December 14th open meeting, however, a slight modification of the first goal was proposed. Rather than the analysis of “a set of literary and cultural texts,” the goal will now call for the analysis of “a set of literary and/or cultural texts.” This change allows for dissertations that are focused purely on cultural texts.

Many of our alumni noted that they would find a yearly meeting of their full committee either moderately useful or very useful. After discussion at the open meeting of the Program and discussions at two Executive Committee meetings, we decided to institute a yearly meeting where the student would meet with the advisor and all members of the dissertation committee. We currently have a policy on our books requiring all members of the dissertation committee to offer written comments on the first chapter, but since this requirement is rarely observed, we are striking it from the books in favor of the annual meeting.

We made many modifications to our description of “The Dissertation: The Prospectus, The Dissertation Itself, and Its Defense” in our Practical Guide to the English Program. Very few of these changes represent major changes in policy but are meant to clarify our expectations to current students. They include:

1. Additions to the sections about choosing a dissertation committee, stressing the benefits of choosing a committee that represents multiple fields and approaches.

2. More information about the prospectus process and how it works.

3. More information about the citation format/style of the dissertation, clarifying that we do not adhere to a particular style (i.e. MLA or Chicago) but that we require consistent formatting.

In response to other alumni suggestions and the comments of our current students, we seek to institute more program events to support their dissertational work. These include:

1. More venues to present their dissertation-in-progress to classmates and faculty in the program.
2. More program events where students might meet faculty working in their fields, even if they have not taken a class with them.
3. More opportunities to explore non-traditional dissertations, especially those with an online or digital component.

Next Steps and Future Action

A. We need to vote on the small change in the wording for the learning goals at our next Executive Committee meeting, and then represent this change on our website and print materials.
B. We are in the process of implementing a yearly meeting between the advisor, the student and the members of the dissertation committee, which will be coordinated by Nancy Silverman, our APO.
C. We are in the process of finalizing our revisions to the Practical Guide to the English Program, and those will be posted on the website soon.
D. We are working with the Friday Forum Committee and with our student Interest Groups to create more events where students might meet and develop relationships with members of the faculty with whom they have not taken classes. We have recently hosted a number of events where students have presented on their scholarship, and we will continue to do so.
E. We expect to make a faculty appointment in Digital Humanities soon, and we expect that developing this area of the curriculum will inspire some of our students to explore non-traditional dissertations, especially those with a digital component.

Appendix I: Alumni Publication Data from 2008-2012

We surveyed 133 alumni from 2008, and received 59 responses. We asked them about their publications arising from their dissertation research. Here’s the information they provided:

Published a book from the dissertation: 7 alumni
Working to publish a book: 27 alumni
Have published articles from their dissertation: 27 alumni
Working to publish articles from their dissertation: 14 alumni

Appendix II: Placement Data for Alumni from 2008-2012

Overall data

138 graduates in total

107 working full time in higher education (70 in Tenure-track positions; 37 in Full-Time positions)
14 Adjuncting (2 by choice; 2 had previous term appointments; 1 Adjunct Professor; 1 Adjunct Assistant Professor)

17 Non-academic Employment or no data available

**Yearly Breakdown**

**2008**

26 total

24 have full time academic positions

20 have full time tenure track jobs

- 1 Full-Time Assistant Professor
- 1 Full-Time Lecturer
- 1 FT non-TT position
- 1 term appointment

1 is a long-term fellow at an Institute abroad

1 possibly changed profession

**2009**

33 total

23 have full time academic positions

- 14 Tenure-Track positions
  - 7 Full-Time academic positions [2 writing center directors; 1 Full-Time position will convert to Tenure-Track on thesis completion]
  - 1 Full-Time term appointment
  - 1 Full-Time secondary education position

7 Adjuncting

- 1 by choice
- 1 following expiration of term appointment
1 change of profession
2 unknown

**2010**

22 total

16 in full time academic employment

- 12 Tenure-Track positions
- 1 Full-Time position
- 2 Full-Time secondary ed positions
- 1 term appointment

4 Adjuncting

- 1 by choice
- 1 had previous term appointment

2 non-academic employment

**2011**

22 total

16 in full time academic employment

- 8 Tenure-Track positions
- 4 Full-Time positions
- 1 term appointment
- 3 postdocs

3 Adjuncting

- 1 adjunct Professor
- 1 adjunct Assistant Professor

1 unknown

2 off market
2012

35 total

28 working in full time academic employment

  18 Tenure-Track positions

  4 Full-Time positions (2 writing center directors)

  3 postdocs

  1 visiting appointment

  1 substitute appointment

  1 term appointment

  1 part-time lecturer position

  1 independent scholar/writer

  1 changed profession

  2 on market

  2 off market