Ph.D. Program in French

Final Assessment Report: Ethics Training for Doctoral Candidates

The Ph.D. Program in French already completed its Professional Development assessment several years ago, and thus treats this Ethics training assessment as a separate report.

Professional development is taken very seriously in the Program and many of the activities and forms of training that we provide also create the foundation for or intersect with the thrust of our Ethics training. These include encouraging candidates to frequently present their work in public academic venues and to begin publishing early on, and the attention given to their training as teachers of French in the foreign language and literature classroom.

In these areas, our candidates are closely advised on the importance of scholarly standards in supporting their arguments, in referring to the work of others, and in instilling integrity in their own students. These elements are important components of Ethics training as well.

As is the case in most other programs in the Humanities, Ethics training of French doctoral candidates adheres to a few very specific parameters. It does not, for instance, encompass protocols for experiments. There is generally little use of surveys and interviews in our candidates’ research, and collaborative projects before the completion of the degree are rare.

From the moment they enter the Program, French doctoral candidates are asked to work on a substantial paper of about forty pages in a required first-semester course, and in this task in particular, but in all subsequent written and oral work as well all the way to the dissertation, they are taught to fully document and support their arguments and theories.

At the same time, they are trained to understand that the need for footnote/endnote referencing as well as substantial bibliographies in any work they produce is both a professional and ethical requirement that shows proper respect for the work of others and for intellectual property, regardless of whether the work quoted has been actually published.

When our candidates do include interviews or surveys with human subjects in their work, the required standards are made clear to them by working through and complying with the IRB’s human participants rules, in particular with respect to completing the dissertation. In discussions with the Executive Officer and Advisor about their dissertation research, its protocols, methods, and expected outcomes, our candidates are carefully counseled on the importance of these rules and on the ethical implications of human participants in research.

By focusing on the content of their work and its implications, the Program makes it clear that the Human Participants standards are not a mere formality, but an entire process that must begin early in the dissertation research. In these conversations with candidates, we stress that the aim of early attention to Human Participants rules is not simply to receive timely clearance, but to engage in thoughtful consideration of the professional responsibilities involved.
The Program asks its faculty to include in syllabi the official warnings against plagiarism that CUNY colleges put out, but we also discuss with our students the many forms that plagiarism takes, from those they may claim to be “unwitting” to the most egregious. We also discuss the complex relationship of protected work, of work and words formulated by others, and the often confusing publicity and aura of being a public exchange place afforded by the Internet. Finally, we encourage our students, who all teach at our CUNY colleges, to be alert to these same issues among their own students and to seek advice and support when needed in addressing them.

In summary: Ethics training in the French Program derives from three main areas: a) formal professional development workshops where such issues are raised; b) instruction and calls to vigilance by instructors in the doctoral classroom; c) extensive and frequent conversations about their entire work and career plans with the EO and/or DEO in which ethical considerations figure prominently.

It adopts the following main forms: learning the importance of scholarly referencing and bibliographical standards in all their submissions; learning to respect the work of others as well as protect their own; attending to, understanding and complying with the standards and ethical implications of the IRB form.

As a result, we encounter very few issues if any in these areas with our students. Our French doctoral candidates display a high level of professional responsibility and understanding, demonstrating that they know how to perform as ethical members of the academic community in the field of French literature and French studies. Plagiarism issues are quasi absent. Candidates demonstrate excellent citation skills when they submit papers and the dissertation. In fact, many of our candidates achieve an early status as respected members of the academic community before graduation, and sometimes at the time of entering the Program, and are eminently employable afterwards.