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It is difficult to assess the French’s program strengths and weaknesses at this point in time. I have been the Executive Officer for about six months, and new committees with new members have been elected. The members of the Curriculum Committee and I are eager to change the curriculum which needs to be streamlined. My research assistant looked at the French curriculum of twelve graduate schools (both public and private), and has written a comparative report. The DEO of French, Sam Di Iorio, and I have also looked at the French curriculum of the universities where we did our graduate work (University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University). Finally, we looked at the English and Comparative Literature Programs’ curricula of the Graduate Center. We will compare all these curricula in order to improve our own program.

Currently, the Ph.D. in French has six major benchmarks that students must meet. These six requirements are: Course work; First Examination; Second Written Examination; Second Examination Orals; Foreign Language Requirement; Dissertation. Additionally, the Program requires a Specialization Review, a dissertation proposal, and a dissertation concilium. Therefore, there are nine steps leading to the writing of the dissertation. As it is, the curriculum is not only fastidious and exhausting, but difficult to figure out, and understand. For students, it is
complicated to schedule and plan that many requirements. Moreover, students are always preparing an exam, taking care of a requirement. It is busy work. Meanwhile they are not writing, not reading, not thinking. The curriculum committee and I are set to reduce the number of requirements by eliminating some requirements, and by merging other requirements. The current French curriculum is painstaking, yet imprecise. It lacks the flexibility the program claims to have.

The most urgent changes concern the Second Written Examination which has two components. The first component is a written exam (three hours). Students receive four questions related to periods in French literature, but only answer one… Students tend to answer the question to which they know the answer, and the purpose of the exam (training generalists familiar with all periods of French literature) is not met. The second part of the Second Written Examination is a 25-page paper on a topic related to the dissertation topic. This step has proven to be difficult for students. It slows them down. Students also find this paper pointless as it tends to be a summary of books and articles not specific enough to help them with their dissertation and not broad enough to help them becoming generalists.

The other urgent issue is the Specialization Review which happens after 45 credits. It is yet another step, especially difficult to schedule. It requires a 10 pages paper, and a dossier of writing samples – a great amount of work that stops students from progressing. Its purpose - “assessing one’s intellectual itinerary” - could be accomplished with informal meetings with faculty.
Another example of is that students are required to take a minimum of 60 credits in course work after the B.A. to qualify for a Ph.D. Students already in possession of an M.A. degree in French must have their transfer credits individually evaluated: up to 30 credits may be awarded provided the courses correspond to those accepted in the program. 16 of the 60 credits may be taken in other fields and programs approved by the Executive Officer. Students with 27 or more transfer credits must take at least 18 credits in the French Program. Both the 16 credits rule and the 18 credits rule are difficult to monitor. They are somewhat arbitrary, and overly punctilious.

In the French program, two courses are mandatory courses: “Techniques of Literary Research” and “Problems and French Literary History: the Novel.” The second one needs to be renamed in order to include not only novels, but all genres (poetry, theater, etc.). Techniques of Literary Research is a survey of important theoretical and philosophical texts; “Problems in French Literary History” should also be a survey of important French Literature, a survey that would give a general and broader view of French literature.

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