Outcomes Assessment
History Program
Spring, 2019

1. Areas of assessment

For this year’s OA cycle, we are assessing our system of first-year examinations, which includes a 10-credit sequence of courses (5 credits each in fall and spring) known as the “literature reviews”. These courses were designed nearly ten years ago with the aim of preparing students for the exams; their workload is approximately two books per week plus supplementary articles and reviews as appropriate. The exams are taken in two parts, at the end of each semester, in which students have eight hours to answer a selection of essay questions. The responses are graded by a committee of three faculty members in the relevant field, one of whom was the instructor for the literature review just completed.

2. Expected learning outcomes

As mentioned in our 2018 Assessment Worksheet, our hope is that the first-year exam and literature surveys will help a student to achieve “mastery in the history and historiography of a major field” and to develop an “awareness of discipline-specific... written communications skills.” The evidence for both of these is to be a student’s ability to “identify, summarize, and assess the significance of literature dealing with their... field” in a “formal, written” capacity.

3. Evidence

Our principal assessment tools are twofold. First, we have compiled data (anonymized) in a spreadsheet that charts our students’ performance in the exam over the past five years (2013-18) against a number of different parameters, such as a student’s subfield of History, their level of funding, their fluency in English (as judged by TOEFL), their number of graduate transfer credits, and whether they took the surveys as a class or as independent studies. Second, we designed and distributed surveys, one for faculty and one for students, about their experiences of the system and, if any, their suggestions for change. Some of things we asked about were the nature and definition of reading lists and syllabi, the timeline for taking and re-taking the exams, the amount of guidance required for re-takers, and rubrics for assessment.

4. Findings

From the spreadsheet, we note that of the 59 students in the sample, 54 passed the exams on the first try. Of the remaining five, two passed individual exams on the second try; two passed on the third try; and one did not pass and left the program. In all five cases, the students in question had full funding; that is, all of our tuition-only fellows passed on first tries.

Four of the five who required more than one attempt on the exams were native English-speakers, including the student who did not pass the exam. Comparably, there were nine students in the overall sample who had entered on the basis of TOEFL scores. Therefore, the
first-try success rate for native English speakers is 92% and for non-native speakers, 88%. We thus see no problems in this regard.

The number of transfer credits appears not to be a predictor of success or failure in the exam. Two of the five who required more than one attempt had 30 and 27 transfer credits, one had 18, and one had zero (another has not yet filed for transfer credits).

In all five cases of second or third attempts, the students took the literature review in the classroom. In four of these cases, the field was U.S. History and in the fifth case, it was Modern Europe. As a corollary, all students who took the exams by independent study—typically in fields for which we admit fewer students, such as Middle Eastern History and Latin American History—passed on the first try.

According to the survey results of nine faculty members, in general most expressed satisfaction about how the literature review courses prepared students for the exams. Several noted that in their own recent iterations they had intentionally planned the syllabus with the exams in mind and conducted classes accordingly. As for how reading lists were defined, there was broad support for instructors sharing their syllabi in advance with relevant colleagues in the field and inviting comment, but ultimately, the instructor would have the final say. One called not for a list of books but perhaps at least a “menu of historiographical issues we think our students should encounter”, and one recommended at least requiring temporal boundaries so that the in-between periods don’t get short shrift. (Similarly, a student survey recommended changing the end-date for the first half of the U.S. literature review to 1877, but retaining the start-date of the second half at 1865. In other words, books on Reconstruction would be relevant to both, rather than the current system in which it is fairly well ignored by both, in their opinion.) There was no support for compelling instructors to work from a predetermined syllabus (although students in some ways disagreed; see below).

Many colleagues suggested that specific rubrics should be made available to students, in which the elements of an ideal essay would be spelled out. This would also assist when faculty are providing feedback to those who are re-taking. The majority saw no need to revise the timing of first attempts on the two parts of the exams. As for the timing of re-takes, a couple of colleagues called for greater flexibility, within reason, so that different cases could be handled in ways appropriate to themselves. But in opposition to that, an equal number of faculty stressed the importance of being able to remove a student in good time, if need be, to avoid larger problems in the future, be they related to students’ pedagogy or to their advanced research. As for positive outcomes, there was broad support for labeling more exams as “pass with distinction” if they so merit.

Three suggestions from the faculty surveys and exams deserve their own attention. First, a case was made by three faculty members for students to take the exam in four hours and not eight, and for the exams to be closed-book and no-internet. They found that in the current system, books and articles are often analyzed individually and not put into dialogue with each other, perhaps signaling undue reliance on a search engine. Interestingly, one student survey agreed in the main with this observation. Second, two faculty members questioned the
selection of instructors for the literature surveys. One raised the idea of consulting with the faculty in the field, rather than leaving the selection to the E.O. while another suggested that only central line faculty should teach the courses, because of their allegedly greater investment in the program and its students. Third, a faculty member suggested revising the exam with a view to making it relevant to the students’ upcoming work in the classroom. In such a model, students might be asked to ponder the readings they would assign, the themes, or “through-lines”, that they would emphasize, and to annotate all of it with references or supplementary essays that demonstrate their knowledge of scholarship. (Our summary here is not doing justice to the faculty member’s detailed proposal.)

Turning to the student surveys, three things are clear. 1) A large majority of students said that the literature reviews were indispensable in their preparations to teach their own courses. 2) In a similar vein perhaps, many students would like there to be more consistency in the reading lists from one faculty member to the next, so as to clarify which older works are seminal and which newer ones are important, at least according to “general consensus”. Most would accept also that some amount of autonomy should be granted to instructors for the addition of material that suits their own interests. 3) Every student surveyed would like to see rubrics for expectations in the essays. Three students would have liked an assessment of their work even in the event of passing, so that they would know what they’re doing right and in what areas they need to improve.

Universally, students do not want to return to the system where the first exam was taken once, in August. Most do not want to be asked to write their responses in four hours, although some pointed out that in many other GC programs, the time allotted for first exams is closer to four hours. Two surveys questioned the reason for the exam, full stop.

5. Proposed changes

Two changes seem to be unanimously desirable to both faculty and students:

1. Instructors of the literature reviews should create opportunities for relevant colleagues to read their syllabus and offer comment in advance of the semester in question.
2. Faculty should institute a rubric detailing expected elements in ideal essays, and should write evaluations accordingly that are distributed to students regardless of outcome.

Other proposals that might require more discussion are about the prospect of reading lists for literature reviews, and the format of the exams and the types of questions that are asked.

6. Next steps

Why, we’re going to form a committee! It will be charged with systematizing the design of syllabi for literature reviews and for defining rubrics for exams, and will explore the nature of the exam.