Academic Programs
Outcomes Assessment Report for 2016-17

School: College of Arts & Sciences
Department: American Studies
Degree/Major: MA in Folklore
Contact:

Part 1: Current Assessment Plan

The most recent assessment plan for this program has been submitted or is attached to this report.

Part 2: Report on Student Learning Outcomes Assessed in 2016-17: Methods, Findings, and Improvements Made or Planned in Response to Results

Instructions: For each student learning outcome assessed this year, copy the outcome statement from the assessment plan, and then describe the methods, performance targets, results, and improvements or action plans made based on the findings. To add more outcomes, copy and paste the outline as needed.

1. Student Learning Outcome Assessed: Discuss and critically assess contemporary and historically important theories and concepts for the study of traditional and vernacular cultures.

Methods That Were Used to Assess Student Achievement of This Outcome at the Program Level (If multiple methods are used, describe each one separately):

We assess students’ mastery of disciplinary theory by their performance on the required comprehensive exam substitute, the Critical Literature Review, as reported by the chair of each student’s thesis committee and aggregated for review by the faculty.

Performance Target(s) for Each Assessment Method Used:
80% pass rate

Results from This Assessment with Analysis and Interpretation:

Four of the five (80%) of the students who were expected to undertake the Critical Literature review this year completed the exercise successfully (the remaining student requested and received an extension on medical grounds). Students demonstrated a thoughtful ability to pull together key texts and concepts from their coursework in order to position themselves within the disciplinary arguments central to their varied MA thesis topics and projected research and career paths. This suggests that the current degree plan, involving two required courses in disciplinary theory and methodology and six elective courses, is providing the students a solid common foundation and opportunities to delve deeply into their areas of specialization.

Program Improvements Made or Actions Planned in Response to These Assessment Findings:

Since the target was met and we are pleased with these results, we decided that no changes were necessary at this time.
2. **Student Learning Outcome Assessed:** Demonstrate the ability to think creatively and critically in approaching specific research topics in folklore.

**Methods That Were Used to Assess Student Achievement of This Outcome at the Program Level (If multiple methods are used, describe each one separately):**

We assess the students’ ability to complete high quality research within the discipline by their completion of a well-researched and well-argued MA thesis, reviewed and approved by their three-person thesis committee and aggregated across the program for faculty review. Our requirements specify a text roughly the length of an article for a scholarly journal, 45-60 pages. We note that in some ways it is actually more difficult for students at this level to condense their work into an article-length piece than to construct the traditional longer, more loosely-argued thesis, but want to encourage students to devote the additional effort so as to create work that it should be relatively easier for them to revise for publication.

**Performance Target(s) for Each Assessment Method Used:**

80% pass rate

**Results from This Assessment with Analysis, and Interpretation:**

As above, four of the five (90%) students whom we expected to complete, defend, and submit their theses in 2016 did so either in the spring or summer session. All of the theses were judged to be very strong. The fifth student is expected to complete her thesis next year.

**Program Improvements Made or Actions Planned in Response to These Assessment Findings:**

Since the target was met and we are pleased with these results, we decided that no changes were necessary at this time.

3. **Student Learning Outcome Assessed:** Demonstrate facility with appropriate research methods (including research design, data interpretation, and collaboration with communities) in their chosen area of folklore.

**Methods that Were Used to Assess Student Achievement of This Outcome at the Program Level (If multiple methods are used, describe each one separately):**

We assess students’ command of research methods by their performance on the final project in the required core course in ethnographic methods based on an annual report by the instructor of that course.

**Performance Target(s) for Each Assessment Method Used:**

90% of final projects rated as High Pass or Pass

**Results from This Assessment with Analysis, and Interpretation:**

The instructor has indicated that all students in this cohort performed well or excellently in the course. The faculty are satisfied that students are being very well prepared for the research they will need to do for their thesis projects and future employment.

**Program Improvements Made or Actions Planned in Response to These Assessment Findings**

Since the target was met and we are pleased with these results, we decided that no changes were necessary at this time.
4. **Student Learning Outcome Assessed:** Demonstrate facility with appropriate methods for dissemination of knowledge about folklore to the general public.

**Methods That Were Used to Assess Student Achievement of This Outcome at the Program Level (If multiple methods are used, describe each one separately):**

We assess students’ facility in sharing knowledge publicly by the quality of their presentations in the year-end departmental colloquium, at which each year’s cohort presents their MA thesis research, and by their presentations at national conferences. A copy of our rubric is attached.

**Performance Target(s) for Each Assessment Method Used:**

90% will be rated as High Pass or Pass on each of the dimensions of presentation quality.

**Results from This Assessment with Analysis, and Interpretation:**

All of the students who were working on theses in Spring 2016 were judged to have made effective and accessible presentations to the assembled faculty and students (ratings of High Pass or Pass). None of the graduating students presented at national conferences this year, but that had more to do with lack of support for travel than with interest or ability. One student did, however, produce an ethnographic film connected to her thesis research and screen it locally and regionally to publicize the issues she is analyzing.

**Program Improvements Made or Actions Planned in Response to These Assessment Findings**

Based on these results, our chair has been active in development work, identifying funds to promote and reward excellence. These funds are targeted for student professional development, for example, to defray the cost of student travel to present their work at conferences, so this should improve students’ ability to make presentations as a result of this experience.

5. **Student Learning Outcome Assessed:** Demonstrate the empirical, methodological, and theoretical grounding, along with professional skills, needed for successful pursuit of career choices.

**Methods That Were Used to Assess Student Achievement of This Outcome at the Program Level (If multiple methods are used, describe each one separately):**

Administration of a questionnaire to students who had completed our program during the past five years, asking what jobs they had currently and recently held, how they employed the knowledge and skills they had gained in the program, and how they would like to see the program change to better serve future students.

**Performance Target(s) for Each Assessment Method Used:**

80% will be in doctoral programs or in a career related to this program. 90% will indicate that they are actively using the knowledge and skills gained in the program.

**Results from This Assessment with Analysis, and Interpretation:**

In Fall 2016 we administered our questionnaire and received responses from or have information via social media about all but a few who graduated in the last five years. Selected results are provided below.

- Recent graduates are working in a wide and exciting range of fields, including:
  - Recognized folklore institutions like the International Storytelling Center, the Southern Foodways Alliance, and the Museum of International Folk Art;
  - Entrepreneurial endeavors connected to their training and skills, including photography and multimedia communications;
  - Journalism and creative writing;
Teaching at the community college level and in roles at 4-year universities where an MA is sufficient;
- Pursuing further graduate education in American Studies, Folklore, and Creative Writing.
- We note in particular the accomplishments of students in creating thoughtfully-curated cultural presentations that are accessible to the public and raise consciousness of pressing social issues, for example, the Fabric of Freedom series at the National Folk Festival, coordinating UNC’s Social Initiative Center, coordinating community engagement for The Museum of International Folk Art’s Gallery of Conscience, and food writing for The Independent Weekly.
- Students regularly reported that the combination of practical training in ethnographic research methods and the theoretical perspective on the role of tradition and vernacular creativity in contemporary culture stood them in good stead for many aspects of their career.
- Students likewise generally praised the core components of the program (theory and ethnography) combined with flexibility and encouragement to pursue their individual areas of interest. A challenge some note is that in a two-year program it is difficult to immerse themselves as fully as they might like both in courses that inform their theoretical and methodological approaches and in courses that provide practical skills.
- Recent graduates suggested five changes they would like to see the program institute:
  1. to refocus the department colloquium so as to make it function better as an opportunity for students and faculty to meet outside the classroom and discuss each other’s scholarly work and current social issues;
  2. to facilitate networking with graduate students and public sector folklorists in other parts of the country;
  3. to organize internships with potential future employers and collaborators in the public and private sectors locally;
  4. to identify and facilitate opportunities for students to take courses in journalism and non-profit management to provide skill-sets they will require;
  5. given that so many students go into non-academic careers, to provide the opportunity for students to satisfy the requirement for a final major project by means other than the extended essay (similar to an article in a major journal in the field) that is currently required.

Program Improvements Made or Actions Planned in Response to These Assessment Findings
The program is already providing students with the insights and skills they require to secure or devise fulfilling employment or to be accepted into and thrive in further programs of graduate study. However, we have already made several improvements in direct response to the suggestions offered by recent graduates listed above.

- We have already restructured the department colloquium in response to suggestion #1 above. A pair of graduate students elected by their peers organizes weekly programming which includes, once per month, a professionalization workshop, a presentation of work-in-progress by a faculty member or advanced graduate student, a meeting of students with the Director of Graduate Studies, and a social event.
- Regarding suggestion #2 above, networking with folklorists in other parts of the country requires funding to help students attend conferences—both national scholarly events and gatherings planned especially for graduate students—so fund-raising for this kind of discretionary fund is a department priority.

The Folklore faculty will discuss and seek means to implement the other recommendations offered by our recent graduates during meetings this year.

(continued)
Follow-Up on Prior Year Improvements Reported and Action Plans: Review your prior year assessment reports and provide updates as described below:

1. **Improvements Reported in Prior Years That Were Based on Assessment Findings** — Provide a follow-up on improvements the program previously reported that it had initiated in response to its assessments of student learning. What have you observed to date about how effective those changes have been?

   The results from our alumni survey (Outcome #5), which we reported in our 2014-15 assessment report, suggested that students wanted more practical links to future employers and support in job search strategies. We identified an opportunity to improve that part of their experience in our program by putting them into contact with working professionals in our field. In response, we added to the department’s guest speaker committee some graduate students who now play a major role in deciding which speakers to invite to campus each year. For fall 2015, they planned a panel presentation by folklorists currently working in the public sector in North Carolina. Based on the feedback we received from student participants who attended the fall 2015 panel presentation, this change was very well received. Students emphasized the value of getting to hear directly from professionals in the field in considering their career paths.

   The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) is also working with the President of the North Carolina Folklore Society (a current American Studies PhD student) to devise a regular series of events at which our students could connect with active public folklorists and the administrators of organizations like the North Carolina Folklife Institute, which can connect students with future freelance and permanent employment opportunities. We will continue to strategize other such efforts.

2. **Plans Reported in Prior Reports for Making Improvements in Response to Assessment Findings** — Describe the status of any plans reported in prior years to monitor, discuss changes, or make improvements based on assessments of learning. Were changes/improvements initiated or completed? Do you have any evidence to date that they been effective?

   In the 2014-15 report, we described the feedback we received on the alumni survey (outcome #5) suggesting that the program needed to provide more opportunities for information and networking to prepare students for non-academic occupations. In response, The Director of Graduate Studies began working with the President of the North Carolina Folklore Society (a current American Studies PhD student) to plan a regular series of events at which our students could connect with active public folklorists and the administrators of organizations like the North Carolina Folklife Institute, which can connect students with future freelance and permanent employment opportunities. We implemented these plans by hosting the first of these events this past year. Student and faculty feedback was very positive and additional events are now scheduled for the future.

**OPTIONAL**

**Part 4: Other Continuous Improvement Efforts Related to This Program**

You can use the space below to describe assessments and improvements made in relation to program goals other than those related to student learning. This might include curriculum redesigns, policy changes and implementations, improvement of advising, recommendations from Program Review recommendations or professional accreditation reviews.
**Evaluation of Other Program Goals:**  *Metrics the program tracks to evaluate other aspects of academic program quality besides student learning, such as graduation rates, time-to-degree, diversity, teaching quality, course and curriculum reviews, etc.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Goal</th>
<th>Method(s) or Metrics Used to Assess Progress or Achievement of Goal</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Improvements</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implement recommendations from the 2014-15 Program Review</td>
<td>We have been reviewing the results and recommendations from our external Program Review last year. We are currently preparing our formal response and action items to be submitted later this year, which will be added.</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
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