

Graduate Program in Composition
Program Assessment
Spring 2012

In 2008 we sought and were granted approval to make a number of changes to our graduate course requirements. One of the most significant involved our culminating experience. Previously our culminating experience was an 898 course requiring students to conduct original research and write a thesis; we now offer an 895 involving a portfolio that includes a shorter piece of scholarship, a set of teaching materials, a statement of teaching philosophy, and a reflection on their learning throughout their graduate studies. Part of our purpose in making this change was to ensure that our culminating project more carefully assessed the learning goals of our program, which include:

To produce graduates who are 1) conversant in recent theories and research in the field of composition and aware of the field as a community of teachers and as a resource for teachers; 2) conversant in the linguistic knowledge necessary to work effectively with student writing at the sentence level; 3) conversant in theories addressing the process of learning to read and write and the nature of such literacy practices; 4) aware of the most up-to-date classroom strategies and principles of effective teaching.

Because a large part of our mission is to prepare teachers of writing, we wanted our culminating experience project to showcase students' understanding of classroom practice and pedagogy, as well as their mastery of the scholarship in composition.

Since this change, we have met regularly as a faculty to discuss the students' portfolios. **These portfolios serve as a primary assessment tool, giving us a clear window into how well our program is working to help students meet our learning goals.** In our assessment of the portfolios, as well as through informal and formal meetings and conversations throughout the year, we have identified areas for improvement and made significant pedagogical and administrative changes to our program.

For example, in 2010 we identified a major source of difficulty in our program: students whose struggles with the work of our program were so severe that they were not able to complete their culminating experience. To address this problem, we moved to strengthen our admissions process in several ways, to ensure that all students who are admitted demonstrate from the outset the skills and abilities necessary for success in our program.

We added a writing sample and letters of recommendation to the list of items students need to provide in their application. We created a system for reading each applicant's file so that any file that seems questionable is read by, in some cases, our entire faculty, in the hopes that the extra scrutiny would help us determine applicants' suitability.

Finally, we have instituted a layer of extra review in our introductory course. Instructors in that course are on the look-out for students who seem like they may not be able to successfully proceed through the program. These students are singled out for extra help. At the same time, we are encouraging faculty to use the full range of grades when they assess student work at the end of each term. This ensures that struggling students are given appropriate feedback throughout their coursework in our program.

Our graduate coordinator, Mark Roberge, has started keeping a spreadsheet of graduate students, with their grades and instructor comments, which he circulates to faculty each year, so that we are all aware of students who may need extra help, or students who may be signing up for our courses without having succeeded in their previous courses. We can now catch struggling students early and intervene appropriately.

In our assessment of the scholarship students are producing for their portfolios, we have also identified another shortcoming in our program: students need more time to develop research and writing skills in order to enter into conversations in the field; at the same time, they need more breadth in their knowledge of research in the field. To address this, we have begun adding special topics electives that give students a chance to develop their skills at writing academic research papers in the field. At the same time, we have moved away from the research paper as an assignment in our introductory seminar. At this early point in the program, students are encouraged to develop a breadth of knowledge about scholarship in the field; as their final assignment in this course last semester, students wrote a series of short essays in answer to broad questions about several different areas of inquiry in the field.

A second assessment tool in our graduate program involves data collection and research. In 2010 – 11, we began collecting data from former students about how well their education in our grad program prepared them for their current work as teachers of writing. At the same time, some of us began to conduct scholarly research into MA programs in Composition. One of our faculty, Kory Ching, wrote an article for Inside Higher Ed about the preparation of two-year community college teachers. Several members of our faculty (Kory Ching, Tara Lockhart, Mark Roberge, and Sugie Goen-Salter) gave a highly-regarded workshop at our annual professional conference on the preparation of two-year college teachers of writing.

We have so far conducted 11 one-hour interviews with graduates (ranging from 1 year out to 6 years out). Preliminary data analysis yielded the following:

Top 5 connections between MA program and CC teaching: What is the program doing well in terms of preparing teachers?

1. Providing ample opportunities for practice in course planning
2. Providing ample opportunities for assessing and responding to writing
3. Providing the opportunity to teach in a guided manner through the GTA program
4. Providing a clear understanding of the challenges and issues faced by Gen 1.5 students

5. Providing specific strategies for teaching Integrated Reading and Writing, including KWL+ and schema activation

Top 5 disconnections/gaps between MA program and CC teaching: What is the program doing not-so-well?

1. Preparing students for the huge diversity of CC students in areas beyond culture, including: age, maturity, educational background, personal history, motivation, social abilities, and learning and physical disabilities, as well as the associated issues brought on by the combination of student density and diversity they face, including planning courses for very diverse classes, classroom management, and the wide-ranging academic preparedness and writing ability levels faced within the same classroom. Preparing students for the low-level writing and reading abilities of many of the CC students and how those abilities often do not match many of the strategies and philosophies taught at SF State
2. Preparing students to evaluate when to teach grammar directly, how much grammar to teach, to teach grammar to ESL and low-level students, to help students with extreme sentence-level grammar issues, and how to balance the teaching of higher-order writing against their students' need for grammar instruction, the disconnect between grammar pedagogy philosophy at SF State and the real-world needs of CC students, especially for ESL and low-level writers and readers.
3. Providing students with strategies to handle the paper-load of a full-time CC schedule, including sustainable methods of assessing writing for teaching multiple, high-density classes of diverse students.
4. Providing students with the language to discuss and strategies to teach critical thinking, especially to low-level writing students.
5. Providing students with a clear understanding of IRW: its definition, its goals, and its implementation for CC students, especially low-level students.

Based on this data, as well as our research in the scholarship in the field on the preparation of post-secondary teachers of writing, we have begun to identify important areas for change and growth in our program:

*We have addressed students' need to have more direct experiences tied to their future work as two-year college teachers, and have developed a course, 802, directly linking our students to internships in community colleges.

*We have addressed the importance of digital literacies to students' futures as teachers of writing, and have implemented a course, English 707, now offered regularly as an elective in our program.

*We are assessing the value of our reading certificate courses (which deal directly with IRW), and are revising our course offerings to eliminate redundancy and to provide up-to-date scholarship on reading in those courses; we are also discussing ways to link the reading courses more closely with current pedagogical practice by inviting guest speakers from reading programs in two-year colleges to speak in our seminars.