

Chapter X: Graduate Assessment Spotlight

Each year, the Assessment Almanac dedicates one chapter to the assessment practices of a specific graduate discipline in order to highlight some facet of the behind-the-scenes assessment work that goes on at Truman. In recent years, the English department has begun to transform its methods of assessing graduate students, as well as the program as a whole. This transformation of assessment reflects the department's transition from a traditional literature-based program to a more broadly based program. One element of the change that the department has made is the non-thesis option for students completing the graduate program.

The English department, along with all other graduate programs, annually undergoes internal assessment in the form of the Graduate Student Exit Questionnaire. This instrument, which is currently under revision, is somewhat similar to the Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ), but is targeted to the experiences of graduate students. The faculty and department chair administers this assessment with oversight by the Dean of Graduate Studies. Another internal assessment is the Five-Year Review, a study of curriculum, admissions and the overall trajectory of the program. The department reviews the results of its study and uses them to strengthen the program and to make necessary changes or adjustments.

Traditionally, the student who graduates with the MA in English will have crafted and polished a master's thesis, which may be scholarly or creative in nature. The creative thesis is built on sufficient graduate coursework in writing. Thus, this option parallels the preparation expected for a literary-analysis thesis.. A thesis committee comprised of a director, two other English faculty, and one faculty member outside English reviews the thesis. After a formal

defense of the project, the student revises according to the feedback from the committee and graduates once all of the revisions have been approved.

A few years ago, the English faculty realized that some students were not finishing the program. They would complete all the coursework with the exception of the final thesis. As a result, Truman is now implementing the non-thesis option, which is a well-tested national model. Professors and students are still working together to implement this assessment initiative, which began four years ago. The non-thesis option requires that students take one extra graduate seminar. Students who choose this path assemble a portfolio that contains different pieces of work from all four of their semesters as graduate students. One or more of the papers included in the portfolio undergoes intensive revision, with particular attention paid to the bibliographic sources. The student also writes reflective analyses of successful and unsuccessful graduate papers. The non-thesis students spend a great deal of time evaluating scholarly sources in order to discern the editorial standards of a journal to which they might want to submit work. They prepare a conference-proposal abstract for submission, along with a professional resume. Thus, the non-thesis option is very comparable to the thesis option in terms of workload. The final part of the non-thesis project is a conversation among the candidate, the graduate director, and two English faculty members chosen by the candidate. During this conversation, faculty review the candidate's self-analysis, accomplishments, and future plans, with the goal of putting those elements into a broader context.

The English department is slowly moving away from a strictly canonical program by including a greater number and variety of authors and literature in its curriculum, partly as a result of its increasingly stronger connection with the Master of Arts in Education program. The

department is focusing on assessing the program outcomes that it wants for its students: the capacity to perform deep research, to write excellent scholarly or creative work and to exercise awareness of their citizenship in the community of scholars.