Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Summary

Arctic & Northern Studies (ACNS) M.A.
College of Liberal Arts
2016-2018

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1. Assessment information collected
   a) Faculty committee members’ evaluations of their graduate students’ theses and projects
   b) Faculty committee members’ evaluations of their graduate students’ comprehensive exams
   c) Students’ evaluations of the Arctic & Northern Studies M.A. program
2. Conclusions drawn from the information summarized above

Ten students graduated from our M.A. program in the past two years. For the theses and projects, we use a rubric to evaluate the quality of their writing, fluency, and mechanics; the quality of their analysis; their level of research skills; and the value of the contribution represented in the thesis or project. For the comprehensive exams, we use a rubric to evaluate the quality of writing, fluency, and mechanics; quality of analysis; competency in the literature field; and the accuracy of the exam. Finally, for the student evaluations, students respond to a number of questions related to their professional growth; perceived value of the program; and strengths, opportunities, and weaknesses of the program. We discuss each evaluation type below.

a. Thesis and project evaluations
   1. Six students completed theses, while four completed projects. At least one faculty committee member from each student committee turned in an evaluation of the thesis or project; the vast majority of student theses and projects received multiple evaluations.
      a. Faculty ratings of the quality of the writing, fluency, and mechanics ranged from 17 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.26.
      b. Faculty ratings of the quality of analysis ranged from 15 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.43.
      c. Faculty ratings of the level of research skills ranged from 15 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.82.
      d. Faculty ratings of the contribution significance ranged from 18 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.71.
      e. We observe that some students came into the program with strong writing and analysis skills, poised to develop these skills, while other students have struggled to write effectively and analyze deeply, developing their skills only marginally. To address this concern, we aim to be more demanding in the coursework prior to the thesis writing stage.

b. Comprehensive exam evaluations
   Fourteen students took at least one comprehensive exam over the time period. Twelve students took both exams. Sometimes the scores represented the final performance after a rewrite or a follow-up oral exam.
   1. Faculty ratings of the quality of writing, fluency, and mechanics ranged from 17 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.59.
      a. We observe that many students write strong comprehensive exams (even though they need help with their thesis writing).
   2. Faculty ratings of the quality of analysis ranged from 19 to 25 (out of 25), with an average 22.36.
a. Perhaps the greatest weakness of exam writing, for some students, is the ability to analyze argument and concepts at a sufficient level, especially during the exam time of three hours.

3. Faculty ratings of the level of competency in the literature field ranged from 14 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 22.32.
   a. Many students excel at mastering the literature related to their comp topics, although some struggle to integrate academic arguments in a sophisticated manner.

4. Faculty ratings of accuracy level ranged from 18 to 25 (out of 25), with an average of 23.11. This higher mean score illustrates that while faculty would like to see stronger analytical and writing skills in the students, faculty are generally quite pleased with the accuracy of the content knowledge students express.

5. The comps serve the purpose of forcing the students to become conversant in two bodies of literature related to conditions in the north, and this literature supports their thesis work, so we find the comprehensive exam process productive.

c. Student Evaluations
1. All students report growth in their writing skills. Several students note the dedication of faculty, particularly Director Ehrlander, to helping students improve their writing.
2. Most students report improvement in their analytical skills. One mentions that this resulted simultaneously from her enrollment in the RAP program, while another credits Dr. Hirsch’s thesis writing workshop for improving analytical skills.
3. Many students report that they felt they learned from Dr. Boylan’s research methods course. One student would have liked a stronger emphasis on qualitative methods and more writing assignments.
4. All students noted having grown significantly in their knowledge and understanding of northern conditions and challenges. They praised specific classes, special lectures, and the breadth of the program and variety of classes students can take.

Strengths: Students praised the interdisciplinary nature of the program. They expressed appreciation for the warm and nurturing culture of the Arctic & Northern Studies Program, and they identified specific faculty members, especially Director Ehrlander, Professor Cole, Professor Boylan, and Professor Hirsch, as having contributed greatly to their experience in the program. Other strengths students noted included:

- Exceptional curriculum, and curricular flexibility
- Place-based learning
- Special (extra-curricular) events and programs
- Diversity of student body
Weaknesses: One student mentioned that there is a lack of clarity around expectations for projects and that the program is disconnected from the job market. Another student expressed the view that some students are not held to the same academic standards as others. Finally, one student mentioned that we should be more realistic about the length of time that is necessary for degree completion. That is, although our MA is a 30 credit program, students struggle to complete the program in two years, namely because of the thesis requirements.

3. Curricular changes resulting from conclusions drawn above

We are making a number of curricular changes, based on what we have observed and on what emerged through our SLOA process. These changes also reflect the growth in foreign and online students in the program. Given that we anticipate further growth in numbers of international students, we are revising our curriculum to accommodate these students.

1. Writing workshop class: Dr. Alex Hirsch, Associate Professor of Political Science, developed a writing course for ACNS, and we are in the process of making it an official program requirement for all students.
   a. More of our students than ever before are not native English speakers and therefore need extra training in scholarly writing.
   b. Even our students whose mother tongue is English benefit from this intensive work on their writing.
   c. Dr. Hirsh has the students workshop their writing in class, and he gives them extensive feedback as well. Students have responded enthusiastically to the class.

2. Analysis: Core ACNS faculty (Political Science and History faculty, who provide our three concentrations) are committed to emphasizing analysis to a greater degree in all of our courses.

3. Historiography: Northern History Concentration students will now take a graduate level section of Professor John Heaton’s historiography course.

4. More courses offered by distance: ACNS faculty are revising several courses to offer them hybrid, so that we can accommodate our growing number of distance students.

5. Finally, with regard to the concern that it is difficult to complete the program in two years, we plan the following: In our academic orientation, and as we mentor students, we will emphasize more the challenges of completing the program in two years. We will stress the need to use the summer months between the two years effectively and maintain an ambitious schedule of submitting thesis chapter drafts to committee members and responding quickly to their feedback.

We have considered carefully all of these changes in the interest of improving student learning outcomes, accommodating students with diverse needs and growing the program.

4. Identify the faculty members involved in reaching the conclusions drawn above and agreeing upon the curricular changes resulting

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