

**UALR Progress Report Form—2009**  
**Submitted Spring 2010**  
**College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences**

**Program Name:** Liberal Studies

**Degree:** MA

**Plan Number:** 110

**Department:** Philosophy and Liberal Studies

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**Program Description:**

The Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program's mission is to enable graduate students to appreciate and recognize the parameters, strengths, defining assumptions, methods, and limitations of the major academic disciplines. In addition, MALS students learn to appropriate information from at least two different academic disciplines and apply that information to a final thesis or project that goes beyond the scope of either discipline; that is, MALS students are expected to synthesize disciplinary content in a way that is applicable to resolving a question or problem that requires input from the student's chosen fields of study.

**1. Approach**

**Program Goals:**

The MALS program has two primary goals: First, that the students will come to appreciate and recognize disciplinary distinctions, and second, that the students will learn to appropriate information from at least two different disciplines and apply that information to a final thesis or project. More specifically, the goals of the MALS program are to:

- 1) Make students aware of the defining features or assumptions behind the division of human inquiry into the major academic disciplines.
- 2) Convey the limitations and advantages that may accompany treatment of an issue from a single discipline, as well as the limitations and advantages that may accompany treatment of an issue from an interdisciplinary perspective.
- 3) Provide students with the reasoning and communication skills required to engage in interdisciplinary study, including the ability to:
  - a. clearly identify and frame a problem;
  - b. gather, retrieve, and organize relevant data;

- c. analyze and synthesize relevant data with the aim of creating an argument or resolving a problem that spans disciplinary lines; and
- d. effectively communicate the results of this resolution to those who may not share one's own disciplinary perspective.

## Learning Objectives

Graduating students should possess those skills that are typically associated with a strong liberal arts education and facility with interdisciplinary methodology. In general, MALS graduates should be able to: recognize the fundamental assumptions and orientations that shape the academic disciplines in which they have studied, as well as how these assumptions both facilitate and limit academic discourse and problem resolution within those disciplines; identify and address issues that require they use information from, adopt the perspectives of, or employ the research methods of, at least two distinct academic disciplines; demonstrate an understanding of the difficulty and value of interdisciplinary communication; and engage in productive self-reflection of their own interdisciplinary work as well as critical evaluation of the interdisciplinary work of other students in the program. More specifically, the graduates of the MALS program should be able to:

- 1) a) articulate, evaluate and critique the features, methods, or assumptions that define at least one of the academic disciplines the student has chosen to pursue study in (goal 1).  
b) create an argument that opens one of the academic disciplines the student has chosen to an interdisciplinary perspective or approach (goal 2).
- 2) clearly define an interdisciplinary research project and explain its significance (goal 3a).
- 3) propose an interdisciplinary perspective or resolution that is backed by relevant data from at least two different disciplines (goal 3b);
- 4) cogently argue, using interdisciplinary methodology, for this perspective or resolution (goal 3c); and
- 5) effectively communicate this perspective or resolution to an audience with diverse disciplinary training (goal 3d)

## Methods of Assessing Learning Objectives:

These objectives will be addressed throughout the student's career in the program:

Objective 1a (goal 1) will be addressed in a two-step process through a paper that will be composed initially as an assignment in the introductory course, **LIST 7310: Introduction to Liberal Studies**. The paper will be assessed by the committee (the committee is composed of the Liberal Studies coordinator plus two members of the MALS Advisory Group), and it will also be filed in the student's portfolio until the end of the student's career when s/he will write a reflective essay revisiting the original paper. This second step of evaluation will be part of the

course requirements for the final thesis/project course, **LIST 8320**. This is a two-step process of evaluation for this Objective.

Objective 1b (goal 2) will be addressed through a research paper the student will complete as an assignment in the **Liberal Studies Colloquium course, LIST 7390**.

Objective 2 and Objective 3 will be addressed through the student's **thesis/final project proposal**, which will be submitted to the student's portfolio.

Objective 3 (goal 3b), Objective 4 (goal 3c), and Objective 5 (goal 3d) will be addressed through the student's **thesis or final project**, which will be submitted to the portfolio. As the final product of the degree, combining the student's disciplinary knowledge with an interdisciplinary perspective, the thesis or final project will demonstrate the student's ability to propose a perspective or resolution backed by relevant data and argue cogently for this perspective or resolution. The audience for Objective 6 will be the assessment committee, all three of whom have different disciplinary training.

**Objectives 1a and 1b (tied to goals 1 and 2) are being evaluated for 2009.**

The introductory course is the focus of our appraisal of how well each student understands various disciplinary methodologies. We do this by embedding an assignment into the course that asks the students to articulate and evaluate methodologies of a scholarly article selected from the student's primary discipline. In Fall 2008 and Fall 2009 the instructor collected all the papers for the assignment, and a representative sample of 6 papers was provided to the assessment committee. (10 students were enrolled in 2008 and 9 in 2009). When we wrote the new assessment plan in 2006-07, we decided that 6 would be the number of papers we evaluated for this objective, given that there are 10-15 students on average in the class (the same is true of 7390, described below). Currently the average for both classes has dropped to 8-12 students, but we are retaining the sample size at 6.

LIST 7390 (the colloquium course) is the focus of our appraisal of each student's ability to follow an interdisciplinary research agenda and produce a piece of interdisciplinary work; we do this by evaluating the final paper submitted by the students at the end of the course. The final papers are an interdisciplinary research project (using the student's 2 chosen disciplines) on a general course topic (in 2008 the topic was "sex and society" and in 2009 it was "the child and childhood"). In Spring 2008 and Spring 2009 the graduate coordinator collected the papers from this course, and a representative sample of 6 papers was provided to the committee (in 2008 10 students were enrolled in the course and 9 in 2009).

*Means of collection:* The instructor of the Introduction to Liberal Studies course is responsible for collecting and copying (both for assessment purposes and for department files) the papers of all MALS students in both courses.

*Evaluation method:* We have adopted a broad construal of interdisciplinarity (to accommodate both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives). The evaluators—the MALS coordinator, and two faculty participants of the MALS Advisory Group—assessed 1) the introductory students' understanding of, and facility with, specific disciplinary approaches by examining the ways in which they articulated and evaluated the methods, tools, concepts, and

insights presented in an article from the student's primary discipline of interest (the article was of the student's choice); and 2) the colloquium students' interdisciplinary perspective as presented in a paper that used relevant data from at least two different disciplines, and the success of the paper as an interdisciplinary project.

*Evaluators:* The materials were evaluated by Dr. Earnest Cox (Rhetoric and Writing) and Dr. Andrew Drummond (Political Science). Dr. Hunter participated in assessment meetings and in discussion of the evaluations, but not in the evaluation process itself. Since she is the instructor of LIST 7310 and 7390, it was decided by the committee that it would be best to have the outside evaluators provide a fresh perspective on the student work. Dr. Cox is a veteran participant in the MALS Advisory Group, and he served as outside evaluator in 2007 and 2008, and helped in revising the assessment plan in 2006. Dr. Drummond joined the MALS Advisory Group in 2008 and participated in assessment in 2008 and again this year.

As noted in previous assessment reports, the MALS Program involves participation in thesis/project committees by faculty members from across AHSS disciplines; with the MALS Advisory Group, we have access to faculty who either a) teach MALS students, b) have worked or plan to work with MALS students on thesis / final projects, or c) both, to help with the assessment of the program. In addition to increasing stakeholder involvement, this gives us the benefit of a broader range of disciplinary perspectives in our discussion of interdisciplinarity. Currently the committee includes one Humanities faculty and one Social Sciences faculty. Next year we plan to add an additional member to the committee.

#### Validity and Reliability:

The validity of our assessment approach poses specific challenges due to the diverse understandings of what constitutes interdisciplinary work. As noted in previous assessment reports, the central aspects of our approach, as well as the questions we are asking, are in line with the suggestions published by both the *Association for Integrative Studies* and the *Graduate Liberal Studies Association*. The definition of interdisciplinarity we use for assessment reflects the definitions most frequently used in the department and in the courses we teach (based on research by leaders in the field of interdisciplinary studies, such as Klein, Newell, and Repko).

Reliability of assessment is also a complex issue since the disciplinary backgrounds of individual faculty will contribute to the assessment of student work. Since the evaluators are from different disciplinary backgrounds, this gives a broader perspective. The evaluators discuss the goals, objectives and rubrics to be used before beginning the process. A meeting was then held after the evaluations to discuss findings and to make sure the interpretations of the objectives and the rubrics were consistent. Inter-rater reliability has been increased through these measures.

#### Assessment Schedule:

For the introductory students we assessed 6 papers (a sample). For the paper we assessed objective #1a—the student's ability to articulate, evaluate and critique the features,

methods, or assumptions that define at least one of the academic disciplines the student has chosen to pursue graduate study in (goal 1), via the assignment already mentioned.

For the colloquium course we assessed 6 papers (a sample). We assessed objective #1b—the student’s ability to create an argument that opens one of the academic disciplines the student has chosen to an interdisciplinary perspective or approach (goal 2).

Our assessment calendar is as follows:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Materials Assessed</i>	<i>Goals</i>	<i>Objectives</i>
2007 (year 1)	paper on disciplinary methods (7310) Interdisciplinary research paper (7390) Reflective disciplinary essay (8320) <sup>1</sup>	1 2 1, 2	1a 1b 1a
2008 (year 2)	Thesis/project proposals Theses/projects	3a, 3b 3c, 3d	2, 3 4, 5, 6
2009 (year 3)	Essay on disciplinary methods (7310) Interdisciplinary research paper (7390) Reflective disciplinary essay (8320)	1 2 1, 2	1a 1b 1a
2010 (year 4)	Thesis/project proposals Theses/Final Projects	3a, 3b 3c, 3d	2, 3 4, 5, 6
2011 (year 5)	Discuss findings, revisions to plan		

## 2. Latest Findings and Changes

### Findings:

For all objectives, the evaluators used a 3-point scale where 0 stood for no competence demonstrated, 1 stood for limited competence demonstrated, 2 acceptable competence demonstrated and 3 excellent competence demonstrated.

For **objective #1a**, we used 2 questions:

1) Did the student articulate the features and methods of the discipline represented in the selected journal article?

The biggest difference between the two evaluators on this question was 0.5. There was remarkable consistency for this question. The overall average score was a 2.3, just a tad above “acceptable competence demonstrated.”

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that we have only limited data on this assignment since this was a new assignment created when the 2006 assessment plan was created. Students only write this in their final semester, so we have to wait for students who began the program in Fall 2007 or after to graduate in order to collect this data.

2) Did the student evaluate and critique some of the features, methods or assumptions in the research presented in the selected journal article?

Again, the greatest difference was 0.5. The average score here was 1.9, which is not quite the 2.0 needed for “acceptable competence demonstrated.”

For **objective #1b**, we used 2 questions:

1) Did the student clearly define an interdisciplinary research project?

The largest difference between evaluators here was 1 point. We discussed the criteria and the question as well as the individuals papers where the difference was 1 point and came to the conclusion that, in some cases, a reviewer wanted to change his score, and in other cases, the reviewers both felt comfortable with the number they gave. The overall average was 2.0.

2) Was the student’s paper effective and successful as an interdisciplinary project?

The largest difference was 2 points on a single paper, but, in general, any differences were 0.5-1 point in difference. As above, discussion was helpful in considering how each evaluator came to his decision, and we decided that we were happy with the average of the two scores in each case.

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
<b>Introductory course: methods papers</b>	
#1a:	
1) articulate the features, methods, or assumptions that define the academic discipline	2.3
3) evaluate and critique the features, methods, or assumptions that define the academic discipline	1.9
#1a: Reflective disciplinary essay (8320)	No numerical score; see discussion
<b>Colloquium: Final paper</b>	
#1b: create an argument that opens one of the academic disciplines the student has chosen to an interdisciplinary perspective or approach; measured in 2 steps:	
a) clearly define an interdisciplinary research project	2.0
b) complete an effective and successful as interdisciplinary project	2.3

This shows that for each course, and for each measure the students are meeting average competence, or nearly meeting average competence.

### **Discussion:**

These results show that for most measures the overall student work is at or just below average competence. Interestingly, on objective 1a, students are better at articulating the features and methods of a discipline than they are at critiquing and evaluating those methods. This may suggest that students are very new to the idea of inserting themselves into the research they encounter critically, rather than just accepting what they read. The goal of the readings and assignment are to help students become confident with the terms used in their disciplines (and in general) to describe and explain research methods. They seem to be mainly comfortable with the vocabulary and concepts but less comfortable with the critique or evaluation. This could be because the students are completing this embedded assignment midway through their first semester of graduate school (for the large majority), and thus they may not yet have the confidence needed or even the familiarity with the discipline in question needed.

For objective 1b, we noticed that the two questions that get at the evaluation of the objective can be tied explicitly, e.g., a student can't complete a successful interdisciplinary paper (#2) without having articulated and explained the interdisciplinarity of the project (#1); or, the two questions could be de-coupled, such that a student could still complete a successful (or somewhat successful) interdisciplinary paper without having made explicit the ways in each discipline was involved. The evaluators, who had no familiarity with the papers, occasionally had difficulty discerning which disciplines were used, which means some students are failing to be as explicit as needed. Nevertheless, sometimes students incorporated multiple perspectives, so that even with the lack of clarity about the two main disciplines, interdisciplinary scholarship was happening in the body of the paper. This presents an interesting conundrum that we will consider clarifying next time we evaluate this objective (should we tell evaluators to couple or de-couple these two based on these experiences?). In addition, the instructor can try to clarify the need for explicit explanation of interdisciplinarity in the assignment instructions. The evaluators felt that it appeared that some students got too involved in the topic of the paper and thus were less focused on discussing the disciplines contributing and how they were doing so.

Overall, we were relatively pleased with the work the students produced, with the above caveats. More explicit interdisciplinary description and discussion is needed, since that is the objective and goal we are aiming for in the program (and in our assessment of our success).

#### Discussion of Objective #1a, Reflective disciplinary essay (8320).

As noted in a previous report, this is a new assessment measure introduced when we drafted a revised plan in 2006. An embedded assignment was created for LIST 8320 (the final thesis course, during which students typically finish and defend the thesis or final project). In this assignment, students are given their methods evaluation paper (and article) from LIST 7310, and asked to write a 4-5 page essay reflecting on the evaluation they completed previously as well as re-evaluating the article for anything they missed, and finally, discussing how their interdisciplinary course of study allows them to reflect differently on the original essay.

Students who began the program in Fall 2007 were the first to complete the LIST 7310 assignment, and thus, they are the first cohort who will reach LIST 8320 and be assigned the reflective essay as part of the course requirements. To date, only 1 student who began in Fall 2007 or after has completed LIST 8320 and graduated (several are slated to do so this spring 2010). Because of the newness of this requirement, we had only 1 essay to evaluate this year. We decided to discuss the evaluation and hold off until we have more exemplars before creating a rubric and deciding how to score the objective.

Our discussion noted that there are going to be several challenges to evaluating this reflective essay; for example, some students (such as the one whose work we had to consider) take one or more classes before beginning the program, thus coming into LIST 7310 with more background in 1 or both of their disciplines than can typically be assumed of most students. This means they might do very well on LIST 7310 evaluation assignment and not have a lot to add in the reflective essay. We also discussed the need to emphasize the fact that students should provide an interdisciplinary reflection in the essay; the student in question did so in a more tangential way. However, we noted that some of this may be limited by the choice of article to evaluate in LIST 7310. Because we compare the original assignment with the later reflection, we'll have to come up with measures that taken into account these various factors. In general, we all agree that the assignment has merit and is a good thing for students to complete, but we are not yet sure how exactly we will measure this reflective essay, and we suspect that in the next years we'll be able to tweak the assignment instructions to help clarify its goals to the students.

#### **Program changes:**

These assessment results suggest a few changes possible in the approach to the program. Dr. Hunter will make sure the instructions used for the LIST 7390 regarding the need to articulate the interdisciplinarity of the paper. Right now the guidelines do state this, but they are general in nature; there could be more specific instructions provided to help students from getting too involved in the topic and research that they forget to step back and frame the project through these terms. Another change may be the instructions for the LIST 8320 reflective essay, but we are uncomfortable making concrete changes at this point, choosing to wait until we have collected more such essays. In terms of assessment, we decided to add a third evaluator to the committee beginning next year, and we think this will add another voice (and another disciplinary perspective) to the evaluation. We will also consider clarifying how to evaluate questions 1 and 2 (inherently together or separately) for the LIST 7390 papers before we evaluate these assignments again. The input of the new evaluator will also be taken into consideration before making this decision. A decision here may require re-writing the questions to make sure they are clear and that they are getting at the elements we want to measure.

#### **Plan changes:**

There are no major plan changes at this time that derive from results of assessment since we are in year three of a multi-year assessment cycle.

### **3. Faculty and Stake Holder Involvement:**

Faculty involvement in the assessment and development of our program occurs in two ways. Primarily, this occurs through the MALS Advisory Group, a group of faculty from all of the AHSS departments where graduate coursework is available. These members advise the coordinator, serve on admissions, assessment and curriculum committees, and liaise between MALS and their home departments. Secondly, faculty from across AHSS (and occasionally outside AHSS) serve as guest instructors in LIST 7310 and LIST 7390, often showcasing their own research. This encourages individual faculty members to be aware of and knowledgeable about the program and helps students learn more about faculty. Finally, since faculty from AHSS serve as primary and secondary chairs for MALS student thesis/project committees, there is direct involvement with the program through individual students.

We completed an alum survey in Spring 2009, and we are taking the data retrieved seriously in terms of improving the experience for students.

#### **4. Secondary Ed Track:**

Not applicable.

#### **5. Assessing Assessment:**

- a. Assessment remains a serious time commitment, especially for small departments with multiple programs to assess.
- b. In terms of needed support, a forum specifically geared towards the challenges faced by assessing interdisciplinary programs would be helpful. The Interdisciplinary Council within AHSS might be able to serve in this capacity.
- c. I estimate that each evaluator spent 15 hours each assessing the MALS program materials (evaluating materials, meeting to discuss evaluations); the coordinator spent about 10 hours collecting and preparing the student work, organizing the data provided by the evaluators, attending the meeting and writing this report.
- d. Since neither of our required courses is offered online, and since the online courses our students may take in other departments are not within our control, we have put no such guidelines in place to date.