Undergraduate Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Cover Sheet

Degree: MA in Interdisciplinary Studies

For Calendar Year: 2014

(Date submitted to college committee): March 2015

(Date posted on college assessment website):

By: Angela Hunter

Overall Rating: 

Respond to all six parts following the “Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Instructions.” Attach additional pages as needed.

(NOTE: Parts 1 through 4 can be copied from the relevant sections of your assessment plan.)

(1) Student learning goal(s) addressed this year:

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;

(2) Learning outcomes/objectives for those goals addressed this year:

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) explain the limitations and advantages to studying a particular issue from the perspective of a single discipline (goal 2)

2. clearly define an interdisciplinary research project and explain its significance (goal 3a).

(3) Courses & activities where assessed:
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, IDST 7310: Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies. The paper will be assessed by the committee, 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, IDST 8320. This is a two-step process of evaluation for this Objective.

Objective 1b (goal 2) will be addressed through the reflective essay collected in IDST 8320.

Objective 2 and Objective 3 (goal 3a and goal 3b) will be addressed through a final paper in IDST 7390 and the student’s thesis/final project proposal, both of which will be submitted to the student’s portfolio. The IDST 7390 paper will be assessed focusing on the first part of the objective (clearly defining an interdisciplinary research project) whereas the thesis/final project evaluation will cover both parts of the objective.

(4) Methods used:
The evaluators—two faculty participants—assess students’ ability 1) to clearly define an interdisciplinary research project and explain its significance; 2) to propose a perspective or resolution that is backed by relevant data from at least two different disciplines; 3) to cogently argue for this perspective or resolution; 4) and to effectively communicate this perspective or resolution to an audience with diverse disciplinary training.

The evaluators use a rubric with a scoring scale from 0-3 (below are some examples of the questions used). The evaluators and the program coordinator meet to discuss the quantitative and qualitative findings and then the coordinator writes the report based on the evaluations and the discussion.

Question 1) Did the student articulate the features and methods of the discipline represented in the selected journal article?
   0 = articulation of features and methods is not evident
   1 = articulation of features and methods is left implied
   2 = articulation of features and methods is evident but partial or surface
   3 = strong and clear evidence of articulation of features and methods

Question 2) Did the student evaluate and/or critique some of the features, methods, or assumptions in the research presented in the selected journal article?
   0 = evaluation and/or critique is not evident
   1 = evaluation and/or critique is left implied
   2 = evaluation and/or critique is articulated but not supported
   3 = evaluation and/or critique is clearly articulated and supported
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<th>Question 3): NOTE: ONLY FOR IDST 8320 REFLECTIVE ESSAYS</th>
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<td>Does the reflective essay show growth in perspective in terms of understanding, evaluation, and/or critique of the features/methods/assumptions in the research presented in the original paper?</td>
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<tr>
<td>0 = no change in reflection apparent between original paper and reflective essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 = reflective essay shows minimal growth in perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 = reflective essay shows some growth in perspective</td>
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<td>3 = reflective essay shows growth and maturity in perspective</td>
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What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

For 2014, Gregory Shufeldt (Political Science) and Earnest Cox (Rhetoric and Writing) served as evaluators. Dr. Cox serves on the MAIS Faculty Advisory Group and has participated in MAIS assessment for several years; Dr. Shufeldt is new to UALR this year and is replacing Andy Drummond in this capacity.

This year we evaluated 4 student papers for objective 1a (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). We asked 2 different questions to tease out the specifics of this objective. The average score was 2.3.

We evaluated 4 student papers for Objective 1b (explain the limitations and advantages to studying a particular issue from the perspective of a single discipline), which is the reflective essay that discusses the earlier assignment used to evaluate Objective 1a. We have 4 paired papers where we were able to score students both for their original assignment (in first semester of program) and on reflection essay about that assignment (in final semester of program). This is the first year we've had enough paired assignments to make a meaningful assessment. The average score was 2.0 for this measure.

We evaluated 5 students papers (from an interdisciplinary colloquium) for Objective 2 (goal 3a): clearly define an interdisciplinary research project and explain its significance. The average score was 2.1.

In these results we find that students are showing adequate but not accomplished mastery of the objectives laid out in the overall program goals. On objective 1a the students scored best overall, with one evaluator giving scores of 3 and the other evaluator scoring more of them as 2. When it came to the reflective essay the evaluators noted that the students struggled with developing a meta-critique, which is in keeping with the objective "Explain the limitations and advantages to studying a particular issue from the perspective of a single discipline." While the students clearly learned more in the interim and were more able to pick out details that they had missed in their original assignment and evaluation, they did not always link this to a larger question of disciplinary perspective. They showed themselves expert at understanding and critiquing the features of the individual article addressed in the assignment, but did not show the breadth in addressing the larger disciplinary perspective questions. This may very well be because of the way the assignment instructions are written, and the evaluators provided good recommendations for how to change this.

On Objective 2 (covered over 2 questions) we discovered, just as we have found in the past, that the students often propose and write very interesting and effective research papers for this assignment, but they tend to not clearly explain and focus on the interdisciplinarity of the paper. Since this is what is being measured (and not overall effectiveness of paper), this leads to lower scores than might be expected. A good discussion developed in the committee about this issue since it's a recurring one (and one that the instructor of the class sympathizes with since students get very excited about the content of the projects related to the class theme and the explicitness of the interdisciplinary articulation can fall by the way side, even with ample reminders).

Overall, the students are doing well but there is room for improvement with regards to
these objectives.

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

The committee meeting to discuss scores and results led to a lively and interesting discussion about the pacing of the content in the 2 required IDST courses, which is very relevant for assessment. The timing of various assignments affects students' ability to complete them at the highest level, since some students in the introductory IDST course are doing analyses of disciplinary methods in their primary area without having had a single graduate course yet in that discipline (or they are taking that course at the same time as the IDST course). A recommendation was put forth to delay that assignment or to alter it such that students are given a selection of articles pre-chosen by experts in the field to help them articulate and assess some important features of the discipline's methods more globally. This would certainly serve the students well and probably increase performance on this measure.

Another suggestion was to change the instructions for the IDST 7390 Colloquium paper and make more explicit to students the importance of the interdisciplinary component. The instructor noted that, since the 2012 assessment, she has given students the actual objective and the questions used in the rubric to use as a self-evaluation tool when completing revisions of the final paper. Clearer use of this self-evaluation tool could be initiated, and peer-reviews focused specifically on interdisciplinarity could also provide more feedback on this aspect.

Finally, the program may consider altering its objectives in relation to overall goals, and focus less on explicit articulation of advantages of interdisciplinary approach and instead adopt a broader focus on multi-disciplinary perspectives.

Stakeholder groups were involved through inclusion of faculty members from 2 different disciplines as evaluators. Furthermore, the assessment report will be disseminated to the MAIS Faculty Advisory Group for discussion and feedback (that committee is comprised of faculty representations from departments in CALS and CSSC that contribute coursework to MAIS). Discussions about ongoing program development (some suggestions of which are gleaned from ongoing assessment) are an important part of the business of this body. Student input is received through regular course evaluations and periodical alum surveys.