

THE 2-4 PROJECT IN THE HUMANITIES

Of 20 departments and programs in the humanities, 17 conducted a 2-4 Project and submitted a report. Renaissance Studies, as a combined degree program that admits three or fewer students per year, asked students to make their responses through their participating department. Medieval Studies and NELC declined to submit reports. Nearly all of the departments initiated changes in their graduate programs, some more substantive than others, in response to the 2-4 Project.

In the humanities, years two through four represent the period during which students make the transition from course work to independent scholarship. They move from being consumers to producers of knowledge. This transition implicates multiple programmatic and administrative issues that range from course work to the submission of the prospectus, and the reviews occasioned by the 2-4 Project made clear that the humanities departments share many common problems, despite disciplinary differences.

The specific issues most widely raised in the humanities programs were:

- communication of standards and expectations
- mentoring at every stage of the program, including guidance on professional development

The majority of departments also addressed at least one of the following, whether or not students had expressed concern about them:

- the nature and amount of course work
- language requirements
- the nature, structure and timing of the qualifying exams
- prospectus development
- timing of teaching

We should examine each of these issues individually.

COMMUNICATION

The emphasis on improved communication of expectations grew out of the responses to the student survey portion of the project. In nearly every program students expressed a desire for more standardized and clearer guidelines for evaluation of overall performance, a better understanding of what constitutes certain requirements, most notably the qualifying exams, and

at minimum a current departmental handbook that would elaborate each of the major requirements. In their 2-4 reports, many departments, including Classics, Comparative Literature, History, German, HSHM and Religious Studies stated a plan to create or substantially revise departmental handbooks and/or handbooks for advisors and examiners. A number of other departments, including Classics, EALL, Philosophy and HSHM decided to provide students with individual evaluations of overall performance at the end of years one and two. This practice is now widely shared among the humanities programs.

MENTORING

The emphasis on improved mentoring also grew primarily from information in the student surveys and from the departmental meetings with students. It is regrettable that students in nearly every humanities Ph.D. program at Yale feel that they receive inadequate mentoring across a broad spectrum of activities, but perhaps in some respects this perceived lack is linked to better communication. If departments provided more transparent information about what they expect and how students should approach requirements, students would feel more secure in their trajectory through their programs.

At the same time, students do need individualized attention and guidance, although the scope and nature of this need differs from department to department. In some departments, such as Comparative Literature and Religious Studies, the greatest need for better mentoring seems to occur early on, before students have selected an advisor, and in each of these cases, the department has implemented a new first- and second-year advising system. In other instances, students indicated a need for better mentoring at every stage, and the departments responded in various ways. In American Studies, for example, they 2-4 committee designed a carefully articulated year-by-year scheme for graduate advising that will help students with every aspect of their work, including curricular choices, exam preparation, the dissertation and professional development. The 2-4 report spells out the duties of the various advisors at each stage. A number of departments responded to students' requests for more guidance with professional development issues. Slavic, for example, will hold seminars on topics ranging from conference presentations to job interviews, and History of Art will provide career workshops with former students as well as more guidance on the various components of the job search. Others, such as Comparative Literature and Spanish propose to offer professional development sessions geared to specific student need.

COURSEWORK

It is clearly the case in the humanities that the nature and amount of course work directly affect students' abilities to progress through their programs in a timely way. Although some programs, such as French and English, continue to structure their course work to provide students with

knowledge across the discipline, many departments recognized the need to balance coverage with either or both introductory methods courses and more channeled preparation for the exams and the prospectus. Religious Studies, for example, a program typically fragmented into disparate fields, will require a methods course of all students, as will HSHM. Slavic, on the other hand, has reconfigured portions of the qualifying exam as course work so that students are better prepared for other portions of the qualifying exam. History is helping students both by implementing more introductory methods seminars and field tutorials in preparation for the orals and the prospectus.

LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS

A number of humanities programs had already reduced the amount of language work required of students prior to the 2-4 Project. In response to the 2-4 Project, German, Italian and Music reduced their language requirements or made them more flexible. In all cases, these changes reflect not a lowering of expectations but, as the Music department noted, the practices at peer institutions.

THE QUALIFYING EXAM

The qualifying exam was the component of the graduate program most commonly altered as a result of the 2-4 Project. Classics, Comparative Literature, EALL, German, Music, Philosophy and Slavic all revised the structure of their exams, typically to help students prepare for the prospectus and the dissertation. Some, such as Classics and Music, altered the timing of the exam, and others, such as Slavic, the structure. Philosophy, in which students write qualifying papers based on seminar papers, has implemented a new evaluation system to help students determine which seminar work will best serve this purpose. A number of departments, including Comparative Literature, History and Philosophy noted a need to clarify the nature of the exams to help reduce student anxiety.

PROSPECTUS DEVELOPMENT

Most programs understand the need for careful monitoring of students at the prospectus stage. It is at this point that students often find themselves working in isolation and without sufficient guidance. Many departments already have informal prospectus workshops to alleviate these problems. As a result of the 2-4 project, both American Studies and History decided to implement required workshops or tutorials leading up to the prospectus. Several departments agreed that the departmental handbooks should spell out in very specific terms the nature and scope of the prospectus. Lastly, Comparative Literature created a prospectus committee that advises the student, the dissertation advisor and the DGS on the prospectus and any necessary revisions.

TIMING OF TEACHING

Year three is often difficult for students because in addition to preparing for exams and the prospectus, they are typically required to begin their four-term sequence of teaching. Although this arrangement works well in most cases, for some students, it is advantageous for students to begin teaching in the second year, leaving all or part of the third year free to concentrate on other work, or in some cases, to leave year four free for research in absentia. In addition to the History of Art, in which students already normally teach in years two and three, HSHM and History will more routinely allow students to teach in year two rather than in year three or four.

BEYOND THE 2-4 PROJECT

A number of departments made revisions that impact students beyond years two through four. Most commonly, programs instituted some form of departmental monitoring of dissertation writing. Several programs, such as English and History, already require a first chapter conference at which a committee of readers advises the student on the first chapter of the dissertation. As a result of the 2-4 Project, American Studies, Comparative, Literature, and German will also hold some version of a first chapter conference.

Lastly, the Music department found the 2-4 project so useful that it plans to repeat it, in a scaled-down version, every two years, “more for tweak and adjustment,” as they put it.