

February 12, 2007

Comparative Literature Graduate Program Review

In the fall of 2006, at the instigation of the Graduate School, the Comparative Literature department at Yale held an extensive review of its graduate program. Rather than confining ourselves to years two to four, we discussed all aspects of the program, from admissions and enrollment to graduation and advice to recent Ph.D.'s. The committee (Dudley Andrew, Pericles Lewis, David Quint, Haun Saussy, and Katie Trumpener) gathered a considerable amount of data about students' experience and performance in the program over the last decade. The Director of Graduate Studies (Pericles Lewis) met on several occasions with groups of current graduate students, and with individual students, to discuss their experiences and suggestions. We sent out a 14-question survey to all current students and recent alumni (since 2000) and received over 30 responses—a better than 50% rate of response. The current document outlines our plans for adjustments to the Ph.D. program. We welcome responses to and discussion of this document and will issue a final report in the spring. Our discussions with students and faculty led us to the following general conclusions:

The department offers a rich educational experience and teaches a wide range of comparative approaches to literature, including: the traditional literary-historical comparison of literatures in European languages; literary theory, an area of historic strength for Yale; an increasing emphasis on non-European world literature; a particularly vital recent engagement with film studies; and a continuing interest in interdisciplinary approaches to literature. All these approaches share a commitment to literariness, the peculiar linguistic and aesthetic quality that is a distinguishing mark of literature but that can also be found in film and in other, not obviously literary, uses of language.

The department remains committed to this broad-minded approach to the discipline of Comparative Literature. Our language, course, and examination requirements reflect these emphases. We have had a generally good record of training students and placing them in academic positions. Responses, in face-to-face meetings and in the written surveys, indicate that students and recent alumni have quite varying opinions on the success of the graduate program. While some alumni look back on their years at Yale as among the happiest of their lives, others recall the anxiety of writing a dissertation in the context of an uncertain future for academic life in general and Comparative Literature in particular. The committee took some comfort in the fact that the most negative assessments of the graduate program came from students who entered ten or more years ago, while a large majority of respondents recognized recent improvements in the program. These include: better funding for graduate students, more attentive advising, and better training in “professionalization” (preparation for an academic career). The greatest change, however, recognized by many students and faculty alike, is a generally improved atmosphere of student-faculty relations. This is of course not a quantifiable phenomenon, but there are quantitative indications of improvement: the median time to degree for Ph.D. students has steadily declined from almost ten years (for students entering the program in the mid-1990s) to less than seven years (for students entering in 2000).

The areas of greatest concern to students, alumni, and faculty are consistent faculty advising and mentoring over the entire course of the Ph.D. program, a reasonable and flexible timeframe for progress to degree, continued financial support, and professionalization with an eye to job

placement. The following recommendations correspond to the major areas explored by the committee and addressed in our survey of students and alumni.

1. Advising and mentoring
 - Incoming first-year students will be assigned a faculty advisor who will advise them through second year; this will be in addition to advice from the DGS;
 - We will devote more time to regular meetings during dissertation phase (see dissertation, below);
 - The department will encourage more junior-faculty involvement with graduate students.

2. Financial support
 - We would like to relay to the graduate school our students' appreciation of the increasingly generous support for graduate study and also their sense of the desirability of a fourth summer of funding and the problem of sixth-year funding: students who teach in the sixth year generally receive quite a bit less money than they did as fifth-year dissertation fellows.

3. Course work
 - We found general agreement that the current coursework requirements are appropriate;
 - We hope to link the required proseminar with the department's open forum to allow new students more opportunities to get to know faculty members;
 - We will consider the possibility of an expanded proseminar in the future; in the meantime, we hope to schedule a number of literary theory seminars each spring, so that students can continue the training they have begun in the proseminar;
 - The DGS will attempt to spread out the scheduling of graduate courses to avoid overlap on Tuesday to Thursday afternoons;
 - The faculty will aim for better coverage of poetry, drama, ancient, medieval, and early modern literature; future hiring may permit coverage of a wider array of languages.

4. Language requirements
 - Students and alumni expressed appreciation for the department's continued emphasis on thorough knowledge of ancient and modern foreign languages;
 - The graduate student handbook will be revised to clarify the level of knowledge of each language required of students.

5. Oral examinations
 - The faculty believes that the oral examinations offer an important opportunity for students to engage in a sustained program of reading that develops their broad knowledge and individual interests;
 - The review committee found that timely completion of the oral examinations is a crucial indicator of ability to complete the degree in a timely fashion;
 - In the past ten years, almost half of our students have managed to take the oral exams by the fall of their third year, and 85% have completed them before the end of their third year;

- The faculty will encourage graduate students to take their oral examinations at one of two standard times during their third year of study: the last day of classes or the first few days of reading period in December; in late February (the second week before spring recess);
 - The orals will continue to consist of seven topics chosen by the student in consultation with faculty and the DGS;
 - A clearer account of the purpose of the orals will be published in the student handbook and distributed to all examiners; this account will specify an approximate number of items to be read per topic;
 - Students are encouraged to consider at least one of the seven topics as linked to a potential dissertation topic;
 - Faculty will provide more feedback on the orals, including a 10-minute discussion of a possible dissertation topic immediately after the exam.
6. Time to degree
- While the department does not wish to impose a maximum time to degree on students, the survey found broad agreement among students and faculty that six years is the norm; five years is often possible, especially for students with prior graduate training; seven years is also acceptable; it is hoped that very few students will need eight years to complete the degree.
 - It is in the interests of students to complete the degree in a timely manner, but the faculty recognizes the importance of having the time to develop one's expertise and knowledge of the field and not to be rushed through the program;
 - Students are encouraged to follow an approximate schedule for progress during their three funded summers:
 - first summer: language training;
 - second summer: orals preparation (and language training as necessary);
 - third summer: initial work on the dissertation;
 - All students are encouraged to submit an initial dissertation prospectus by April 15 of their third year;
 - The department's newly instituted prospectus committee will meet to discuss the prospectus with the student and advisor(s) in late April or May;
 - The prospectus committee will advise the DGS, who alone has the authority to approve a prospectus and advance a student to candidacy;
 - Where revisions to the prospectus are required or deemed desirable, students should submit the revised prospectus by the first day of classes in the fourth year; the ultimate deadline for submission of an acceptable prospectus will remain November 15 in the seventh semester of registration;
 - The department will continue to permit seven semesters of registration before advancement to candidacy; it is understood that students with especially demanding research projects may require some flexibility with regard to this schedule.
7. Evaluation
- Students noted the uneven quality and quantity of written feedback on papers; faculty committed themselves to providing thorough evaluations of students' written work;
 - The department will continue to provide annual written comments on students' progress in the first two years of the program; the oral examiners and prospectus committee will

provide feedback in the third year; after that, the dissertation progress report will provide an opportunity for annual written comments from the dissertation advisor and DGS.

8. Teaching Experience

- The Comparative Literature department has relatively few opportunities to appoint its graduate students to undergraduate teaching positions;
- The faculty will continue efforts to involve graduate students in teaching undergraduate literature courses;
- The committee wishes to call the graduate school's attention to the problem of finding suitable teaching for Comparative Literature graduate students in language and literature departments; such practice is essential to the training of our students, but other departments hold the power to make these appointments.

9. Dissertation

- The graduate student handbook will be revised to include written guidelines as to what constitutes an acceptable prospectus;
- One of the major proposals of the review committee is the establishment of annual "dissertation progress" meetings in the first two years after approval of the prospectus: the DGS will appoint committees of three faculty members (the advisor or advisors and one or two others) to meet with students about their progress; students will supply the committee with written work at least a month before the scheduled meeting; it is understood that non-advisor members of the committee will not be required to read more than a typical chapter of about 50 pages for each of the two meetings;
- As always, the faculty encourages regular meetings between advisors and students—students are encouraged to meet with their advisors often, and no less than once a semester;
- Students are also encouraged to found their own dissertation writing groups, and the department will supply access to photocopying and funding for refreshments for such groups.

10. Opportunities to present research

- Students appreciated the establishment, about a decade ago, of the departmental open forum as an opportunity to share research;
- The committee proposes greater faculty involvement in the open forum; the DGS will consult with the student co-ordinator of the forum before the beginning of each semester;
- Faculty will be asked to present their work at the open forum at least once every three years; a variety of formats are possible for such presentations; these presentations will give new students an opportunity to get to know the research interests of the faculty.

11. Professionalization

- Students appreciated the increased attention to career development during the last several years;
- Some students requested more attention to career possibilities during course-work years; the faculty saw this as mainly a concern for consultation between students and their advisors;

- The faculty will schedule sessions on careers, publishing, conferences, and the job market approximately once a year, in addition to mock interviews for students on the job market.

12. Job Placement

- Regular job placement meetings will continue to be held each spring;
- Despite a very difficult job market for Ph.D.'s in Comparative Literature, a substantial majority of our recent graduates now hold tenure-track positions in academia; nonetheless, we need to improve job placement, and we hope that measures to help students complete their degrees in a timely fashion and to educate them about professional academic life will help to improve our job placement rate;
- The faculty are committed to helping recent alumni who are in non-tenure-track positions move to tenure-track positions;
- Those students who have found tenure-track positions report a high degree of satisfaction with their work; so do many who are pursuing non-academic careers.

13. Combined Programs

- The DGS will meet with the directors in Classics, Renaissance Studies, and Film Studies to clarify and codify requirements for all combined programs.

14. Additional

- Admission of prospective graduate students will take place as early in February as possible, in order to facilitate recruitment;
- Prospective students will be encouraged to visit in a group, in the first week after spring recess;
- The DGS will undertake a major revamping of our departmental website and devise methods to keep it up to date;
- Students in film studies courses (even non-film studies students) should not be charged for renting videos for the courses: Dudley Andrew will approach the film study center about this concern;
- Many of the proposed changes will be spelled out more fully in a revised graduate student handbook.