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The Graduate School

The following is the internal review of the graduate program in French. It is based on formal discussions that began within the Graduate Studies Committee, a group of three faculty members and five graduate student members. Those five graduate students had been asked beforehand to poll all graduate students as to their perceptions concerning Years 2 through 4. The input from that group was then discussed in a meeting of the full Graduate Faculty. It should be stated from the outset that discussions such as these have been taking place with some frequency in our department over that past few years and have already resulted in significant changes in our graduate program, changes which are periodically posted on the departmental website.

I. Mentoring

Students in our department are never without at least one advisor who knows them individually and takes an active interest in their work. Each entering student is assigned a faculty advisor whose expertise, interests, and sympathies correspond more or less to those of the student. Students are encouraged to consult their advisors as much as they like, but are under no compulsion to do so and may change advisors whenever they wish. The DGS also plays an active part in advising each student from the first year onward. To help the DGS in this role all graduate faculty are asked to furnish written evaluations of each student in each seminar, which the DGS can then use in giving formal departmental feed-back to returning second- and third-year students. A formal meeting with second-year students takes place in the fall of the second year, and a frank assessment of the student's progress to date is discussed along with modes and methods of potential improvement.

In the course of the preparation of this review, students expressed a desire for an initial orientation at the beginning of their graduate career, and the faculty thinks this is an excellent idea. So, beginning in 2006-7, in-coming students will meet as a group with the DGS, either just before classes start or in the first week, to spell out the shape and expectations of the program on a year-by-year basis and to lay out the ideal *cursus* of the Ph.D.

During the second year of study students meet with the DGS to discuss composition of the orals committee in light of a pre-orals meeting. In the course of this consultation, each student selects an orals committee consisting of three to six faculty members, one of whom is designated from the outset as the chair. A pre-orals meeting of the whole committee is arranged for the purpose of shaping reading lists, which may subsequently evolve, appropriate to the student's orals questions. The feedback in this meeting is intended to go beyond the knowledge of specialists in a particular field. Often the discussion is wide-ranging and includes input from those outside as well as within the student's intended field of specialization. As the student sets out to prepare the orals, he or she is encouraged to maintain regular contact with all members of their committee, and generally do - sometimes to such an extent that meetings with committee members become virtual tutorials. In effect, third-year students have as many individual mentors as they have members on their orals committees and as much contact with the members of the orals committee as they seek.

In years four through six students are of course mentored primarily by their dissertation advisors. We have increasingly encourage students to consider working with more than one advisor. Departmental "Rules and Regulations" allow students (in consultation with the DGS) to designate two of the three eventual readers of their dissertations as early as the time they submit their prospectus. The idea was to allow, and indeed to encourage, students to benefit as much as possible from the advice and counsel of as many members of the faculty as possible during the writing of their dissertations. A few students have availed themselves of this new possibility, with apparently satisfactory results.

Overall, students express a desire for greater focus beyond the second year on professional development. They feel that at present they get little advice about when and how to present papers at conferences, to publish articles, or even to develop a well-balanced c.v. They also express a desire to begin orientation toward the job market earlier than is currently the case, that is, in the year when the student actually seeks a job. The faculty takes seriously this desire on the part of the students and is not only sensitized to the question, but will make an effort to begin the process of professionalization earlier. It should be noted, however, that the faculty is also aware that over-commitment to professional development should not interfere with progress to degree.

Given the nature of secondary and post-secondary education in the United States today, most students no longer come to the graduate program with a solid background in all fields of French literature or extensive experience in other national literatures, much less with what could be called a broad literary culture. It is not uncommon for the best candidates to have had only a smattering of courses in a few specific areas of French literature, or to have had no experience at all with any literature before the nineteenth century. To such a consideration is added an expansion of the canon into the areas of Francophone Africa, the Caribbean, and the Maghreb where French literature has been most alive in the second half of the twentieth century and which our students increasingly want to study. These facts, and the absolute necessity of training good generalists capable of teaching the whole range of literature in French at the undergraduate level, make it impossible for us to consider reducing the number or the range of seminars we require students to take in their first two years of graduate study. At the same time, the need to train specialists in a particular sub-field within six years makes it equally impossible for us to consider increasing that number and range. We believe that our current sixteen-course requirement, with its various mechanisms for assuring breadth, remains appropriate.

Many students do not come to our graduate program with adequate training in the various languages necessary to do good scholarship in literature. Some come with only one foreign language other than French. A few come with none at all. This fact, combined with an expansion and diversification of the field which has placed other kinds of demands on our students, has brought about a change in our expectations and a gradual modification of our language requirement. In the not-so-distant past, all students were required to know – in addition to French, English, and Old French (which they learn in a required seminar) – three foreign languages: Latin, German, and another Romance language. Today they are required to know only two foreign languages – some Latin and any other language appropriate to their studies. They are also given partial course credit to help them do so: one semester of a language course taken to fulfill a language requirement may now be substituted for one of the sixteen required graduate-level courses.

The rationale for the various changes leading up to the current requirement was that they would allow students to learn two languages very well and with relative ease, and still be

free to learn a third language that might be appropriate to their field of specialization, instead of having to struggle to learn three languages poorly. But many students still have difficulty satisfying the basic two-language requirement. While the number of languages required cannot be further reduced without compromising the training we give our students, the requirement could be further modified in other ways. Several members of the faculty feel strongly, for example, that the Latin requirement is not relevant to some fields of specialization and should therefore go the way of the German requirement and the second Romance language requirement. Others feel equally strongly that Latin is so indispensable to the study of French language, literature, and culture generally that it cannot be abandoned as long as we maintain a commitment to training generalists in French. Whether the Latin requirement is maintained or not, however, some additional remedy seems necessary to help our students acquire the basic tools of their trade.

II. Coursework

The Yale French Department has historically been and remains committed to the idea of training generalists, that is, students who, while expert in a particular field, are capable of teaching the breadth of the canon at least on the undergraduate level. It is our observation that students come to graduate school in French with a more variegated preparation than in the past. And it is our belief that a broad and saturated curriculum will serve them best on the job market, which is tight and in which many institutions, having cut back in French, seek scholars who can teach more than one area of the French curriculum. Given both the necessity of training good generalists and the reality of pre-graduate training in French, the sixteen-course requirement seems reasonable and the range and kind of seminars we typically offer seem appropriate. Some students feel that course work does not prepare them for professional life, whereas the faculty feels that they are best served professionally by the broad training we offer. Some also believe that a four-course load leads them to choose paper topics that are more manageable and less innovative, that they have less opportunity to develop research skills. The faculty recognizes that expertise is not possible across the board and encourages knowledge of a range of topics even though such knowledge may not be of equal depth.

Some students complain that grades are irrelevant, that grading standards vary among faculty, that the comments on final

papers are uneven, and that some are not returned at all. It is somewhat difficult to police such matters within the Department, and reminders are sent to faculty at regular intervals. It is the DGS's observation that the evaluations written after each course are for the most part thorough and realistic and that this is reflected in the grades. Something may change as Yale moves to letter grades as opposed to the traditional "H, HP, P" system. The student suggestion of dropping one or more of the course requirements in the third or fourth semester in order to prepare the orals list would in the view of the faculty dilute course preparation and threaten the goal of historical coverage. This is particularly true, given that students who come with extensive preparation or a M.A. in hand are often accelerated by one semester of course work.

III. Program Structure

Our curriculum is structured in the usual tripartite way: two years for course work, one year for preparing oral qualifying examinations, three years for writing a dissertation. In our discussions we gave serious thought both to the overall structure of the program and to each of its constituent parts. There seems to be general satisfaction with the structure, which leads rationally and by gradual steps from the kind of directed reading and writing that students have done before coming to graduate school to the completely independent kind of work they will do forever after.

As stated above, students must be trained not only as specialists in a particular field but also as generalists if they are to compete for good academic positions. This means that in addition to being prepared to teach upper-division and graduate courses in their own fields they must be prepared to teach language at all levels, a survey of literature of all periods (from medieval through modern, including francophone), some theory, and some cultural history at the undergraduate level. In the past a tendency toward over-specialization and over emphasis on theory alone put our students at a distinct disadvantage on the job market, not only as individual candidates but as products of an institution that came to be associated with narrowness. Today we insist much more on diversity and breadth and general competence, and the students who achieve these things are noticeably more successful at finding good academic positions. For this reason we do not encourage students to specialize before their third or fourth year of study. The oral exam as it is presently structured

serves, in most cases, as an efficient and useful transition from general to specialized training.

Our students typically teach as PTAIs for two years, sometimes three. During this time they have the opportunity to teach their own classes of both first-year and second-year French. Teaching these two courses is an indispensable part of their training and professional preparation. It gives them the experience they will need not only to compete successfully for employment in a college or university but also to teach successfully once employed. Junior faculty in French at most colleges and universities (and indeed senior faculty at virtually all colleges) regularly teach language as well as literature. The teaching our students do at Yale thus corresponds exactly to some of the teaching they will eventually be required to do at the beginning of, if not throughout, their professional careers.

Only rarely do our students teach a more advanced course in stylistics or literature at the end of their graduate study. Students generally view such additional experience as a very desirable thing and often ask for more opportunities to do it. We remain reluctant to offer these opportunities to any but the most advanced students and in any but the most exceptional circumstances, however, for several reasons: (1) the far greater time required to prepare such courses is far more appropriately and usefully spent writing a good dissertation in three years or less, (2) far more can be learned, and more quickly, about practical pedagogy by teaching language than by teaching literature, and (3) contrary to what many students seem to believe, the fact of having taught literature is of no intrinsic value in finding employment. We are happy on occasion to allow some very advanced students to teach French 160 (an introductory literature course) if their dissertations are nearly finished. Otherwise we feel that it would be no advantage, but in fact a distinct disadvantage, for them to do so.

On rare occasion a student in our department may teach for one semester as a TF in another department or program, either in place of, or (more rarely) in addition to, a language course taught within the department. Recent cases have involved multi-section courses in Women's Studies, Film Studies, History of Art, and the Humanities Major. Occasionally, too, a student will have the opportunity to teach a residential college seminar of his or her own devising. Permission to engage in any such teaching outside the department is granted only when compelling pedagogical and professional considerations can justify it -

that is, when the experience of doing so will contribute to the student's training in a field directly related his or her own research, or will advance the student's research and enrich the student's dissertation.

By far the greatest source of dissatisfaction among graduate students in French has to do with the time commitment connected to teaching five days a week, grading, exams, individual consultation and office hours, and correction of homework and compositions. Students found teaching gratifying in and of itself but of little value when it comes to exam preparation and the formulation of a prospectus. The rush of teaching for the first time in the third year is seen as detrimental to student progress in orals work. In their own words, "Almost all students note that the specific requirements of the PTAI assignment (an unrealistic minimum of 20 hours of work a week) is the main cause in the delay of exams, research and dissertating in our department." Students would like either to teach literature courses or to serve as student teachers for large sections, as is done in some departments. They may not realize, however, how much work goes into being an assistant in a large lecture course which requires reading and knowledge of the works on the syllabus in order to conduct what may be a one hour per week section for undergraduates.

Where exams are concerned, some students would like to see a streamlining of the process according to which greater focus would be set into place at the time of the pre-orals, orals would be split between coverage questions and more pointed questions oriented toward the dissertation. Some questioned the usefulness of the "explication de text" and presentation section of the qualifying exams. The faculty has discussed various possible alternatives to our current oral qualifying examinations (splitting the main part of the exam into two or more separate sessions, increasing or decreasing the number or topics, broadening or narrowing the topics, adding or substituting written exams and/or comprehensive exams on lists of required reading, etc.), only to conclude that the exam as it is now structured serves many valuable purposes. It helps students fill gaps in their coverage while at the same time allowing them to investigate interesting, original topics on their own; it invests students with a large share of the responsibility for determining what kind of training is necessary for a successful career after graduate school, and for acquiring that training; it forms a natural bridge between course work done under the supervision of a professor and independent research done on one's own initiative; it has an

important pedagogical component that encourages students to think of their future in terms of teaching as well as research; and it is as useful as any examination can be in identifying and focusing an eventual dissertation topic.

IV. Collaborative Frameworks

The French Department has numerous forums for exchanges of views, presentation of work, and for out-of-class discussion; and these through the Graduate Committee, GAFS (Graduate Association of French Students), departmental lectures, a more informal weekly lecture series organized by students, regular Quaker meetings at which students and faculty discuss *ad libitum* issues of common concern, departmental receptions and parties. As part of this review, some students request a pro-seminar with faculty in attendance for those beginning dissertation research. This is certainly an idea to consider.

V. Evaluation

Students complain that first and second year reviews are not consistently carried out, and they are right to a degree. There was one year in which they were not. However, students do receive regular feedback in classes; and, more important, faculty work intensely with students who are not meeting departmental expectations. This work ranges from detailed explanation of expectations, to recommendations for on-campus help, to sending students to the summer program in Avignon, to recommending a year of make-up study or language work.

VI. Expectations

There is a perception among some students that rules and regulations are not regularly updated and uniformly shared and applied. This is a bit of a puzzle to the faculty, which updates the requirements on the departmental website whenever there is a change and distributes them in hard copy. No more of a puzzle, however, than what we observe to be the widespread student practice of seeking such information from their peers rather than from their appropriate faculty mentor. There has been some, though remarkably little, inconsistency in the fulfillment of some requirements. Faculty have been reluctant to grant exceptions and have been supple in the application of rules only when the alternative would be to dismiss a student who had not met a particular deadline.

Conclusion

Given that many of our students enter graduate school with a less than systematic knowledge of French literature, that many must fulfil language requirements via further study, that the Department remains committed to training specialists with a base of general knowledge, and that the canon of French literature has expanded, it is hard to see how to streamline years two through four without compromising the doctoral program in French.