

## Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures: 2-4 plan

As part of the Graduate School's effort to shorten the time to degree, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures has undertaken a significant restructuring of the PhD program in order to streamline the period from the end of coursework to the beginning of the dissertation. Graduate students take their comprehensive exams in the department during their third year. Until this year we had a system of oral exams taken on 7 topics. Normally 2 or 3 exams were taken at once. These exams were supposed to have been completed by the end of the sixth semester, and the prospectus was supposed to have been handed in by the end of the seventh semester. However, because these exams were individually scheduled, the onus was on the individual graduate student to arrange the exams with particular faculty members in consultation with the DGS. Sometimes graduate students would lag behind because they were too disorganized or too preoccupied with their first experience of teaching to arrange the exams, or else the topics were unfamiliar ones which had not been covered in coursework and the students were overambitious in the reading they felt they must do. At other times it was hard to schedule a time when the appropriate faculty members could attend the exam and the stress of the exam process was compounded by scheduling problems. For the past few years many of the graduate students lagged behind in their exams, and sometimes there was another time-lag before they completed their prospectus. They often failed to reach candidacy before the end of their fourth year or even the beginning of their fifth. There was no prospectus defense, which meant that the DGS and the students were only forced to confront the problem of advancing to candidacy when the students had already been placed on academic hold.

After repeated discussions of these problems the faculty decided to restructure the exam system in 2006, replacing the oral exams with a written exam system and a reading list, and also introduce a compulsory oral prospectus defense. The exams are now scheduled at the beginning of the academic year, so that the students know when they are coming. The Old Russian Literature (medieval) topic of the comprehensive exams has been incorporated into the coursework, so that a compulsory pre-1750 course is taken in the second or fourth semester and an exam is taken at the end of the course which fulfills the comprehensive medieval requirement. In the fifth semester the student takes three written exams during reading week in the following topics: 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, nineteenth century poetry, nineteenth century prose. In February of the sixth semester the student takes written exams in twentieth century poetry and prose. Each of the written exams, lasting 3 hours, is written and graded by two faculty members. The student takes a minor oral exam at some point before April of the sixth semester with two faculty members present. In April he/she takes a final oral exam which deals with the dissertation topic. He/she writes a proto-prospectus, 12-15 pages on the area of interest which is given to faculty in advance of the exam. The exam consists of discussion of the topic for 45 minutes. The student works on the prospectus over the summer and has a prospectus defense at the beginning of the seventh semester, achieving candidacy by the end of September. If the student gets credit for MA courses, exams may begin in whole or in part in the fourth semester.

Language teaching in the third year has also been restructured to take the pressure off the graduate students during their exam year. Where they used to teach 5 days a week, now they team-teach with a lector and normally teach 2 days a week. This gives them more time for

exam preparation and provides them with extensive mentoring by an experienced language teacher.

We are currently beginning to implement this new system and the first few students to take it have been moving quickly and efficiently through the new hoops. We see the main advantages as being the following:

- The written exam dates are non-negotiable, and since students have a great deal of advance warning, they know what to expect and are effectively prepared for this timetable from their very first year in the program.
- They receive the reading list on their first day in the program so they know what they will need to have read and by when.
- The final oral exam component means that they must start thinking about the dissertation topic during their sixth semester and will receive some faculty guidance before the all-important summer after that semester when they will write the bulk of the prospectus. They will be ready.
- The written exams, oral exam and prospectus defense form a new series of structured stepping stones from years 2-4, filling what was before essentially a swamp of sinking sand in the program where many students faltered.
- The prospectus defense gives the whole department a stake in the work of the graduate students. We all know what they are working on and have read and discussed their prospectus.
- We have also added a component to encourage graduate students to start thinking about publishing their work in academic journals so as to be more competitive on the job market. They may substitute one of their exams for a publishable article. Part of this process is targeting a particular journal for publication. This demystifies the process of getting published and helps give them confidence.

As DGS I have also made more frequent an occasional series of talks on “professionalization issues” such as conference presentations, publishing, the academic cv, the job market. I hope that this kind of support will also contribute to more streamlining of the program. Alongside this departmental program the graduate students have also initiated a fortnightly colloquium which gets administrative support and advice from the DGS. Every student is encouraged to present at least once every two years so that everyone in the department has a sense of what the graduate students are working on.

Kate Holland  
DGS