

Ongoing Assessment of a University Foreign Language Program

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Abstract: *This paper reviews the process a university foreign language department went through in developing a procedure to assess its curriculum using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and, to a lesser extent, the National Standards, as guiding principles (National Standards, 1996). This procedure included a noncredit workshop that met only once to inform students about the process, an oral proficiency test, and a portfolio of students' written work. Rubrics for evaluation are described. Tables show preliminary results for the first year's assessment. It was found that the average oral proficiency rating for graduating seniors was Advanced-Low and that 74% rated Intermediate-High or better. Similarly, the average written proficiency rating was Advanced-Low. Students also presented material that documented their abilities to analyze literary texts, write in a variety of styles, and demonstrate an awareness of target language culture.*

Introduction

During the past five years, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Weber State University in Utah has been developing a tool for program assessment. All students in lower division courses have been given an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) or modified OPI each semester. In addition, the OPI has been used to assess all potential teaching majors and minors since 1990. The new program assessment has been administered to foreign language majors to inform decisions that will impact methodologies and the curriculum. All graduating majors in French, German, and Spanish were asked to participate in "Senior Assessment," for which they prepare a portfolio. These portfolios consist of a computerized test of speaking proficiency and a number of writing samples chosen by each student to showcase his or her work. Faculty members evaluate the students' portfolios using the criteria described in our departmental learning outcome goals.

Our program assessment is intended to do two things. First, it allows a focused examination of curriculum and requirements to assess the department's success in helping students maximize proficiency, and more recently, to check the department's progress in incorporating the National Standards into the curriculum. Second, by looking at students' proficiency and achievement in their senior year, an assessment can be made as to whether or not they are producing the expected results, and if the department's goals are reasonable.

The department began program assessment in 1998 and has implemented, refined, and expanded the procedure each year. The 2001–2002 academic year was the first year for which quantitative and qualitative data for graduating majors were available.

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