Academic Program Assessment Report

Academic Year(s) Assessed: 2024-2025
College: Letters & Science
Department: Modern Languages & Literatures
Department Head: Galen Brokaw
Submitted by: Galen Brokaw, Patricia Catoira, Anne-Sophie Dubosson, Ada Giusti, Bridget Kevane, Hua Li, James Martin, Peter Schweppe, John Thompson, Peter Tillack

Program(s) Assessed

Majors	Options	Minors
Modern Languages & Literatures	French & Francophone Studies, German Studies, Hispanic Studies, Latin American & Latino Studies	French & Francophone Studies, German Studies, Hispanic Studies, Latin American & Latino Studies
Asian Studies	Asian Studies	China Studies; Japan Studies

Section 1. Past Assessment Summary.

1.1. Prior Assessment of This Years Assessed Learning Outcome

We last assessed this outcome in 2019. That year we did not meet our target threshold. Students did a poor job of formulating research questions, integrating secondary criticism, making their analyses more analytical as opposed to descriptive, and conforming to standard formatting.

1.2. Response to Review/Feedback of 2024 Assessment Report

In the feedback on our 2024 report, both reviewers are quite critical. One of them even suggests that we lied about having a department discussion and dismisses our assessment as a waste:

> "The report offers us the 'what' but not the 'so what?' or the 'how so?' Which strongly suggests that nor did the discussion happen at the department level either. Making the assessment exercise indistinguishable from an excursion in confirmation bias. What could have been an opportunity for serious discussion about what the program is doing well, and how, is wasted on uninformative answers."

The inference that we did not have a departmental discussion does not follow from the claim that the report does not include the 'so what?' or the 'how so?' (whatever that means). Nor does it necessarily make our assessment an "excursion in confirmation bias." We did in fact have a departmental discussion. But leaving aside the inaccuracy and logical incoherence of these statements, the reviewers clearly feel that our report does not meet expectations. The reviewers do not appear to understand that the report form does not require the level of substantive detail that they seem to want. Some of the questions on the assessment form do not even make sense (see below), but even the questions that do make sense can be answered in greater or lesser detail; and the "Assessment Exemplars" on MSU's assessment website include sample reports that do both. The Plant Science exemplar contains detailed responses. The History exemplar in contrast is even less substantive than MLL's 2024 report. The implication of including these different exemplars is that departments have the option of following either model. The only reason to follow the more detailed model would be to get more feedback. We have no desire for more feedback in part because most feedback has been unhelpful. In fact, the last

sentence of the passage cited above applies *mutatis mutandis* to the 2024 feedback itself: what could have been an opportunity for serious discussion about our assessment is wasted on uninformed comments and suggestions. Rather than merely assert deficiencies in the feedback, we will explain in detail *how* it is problematic and why we did not follow the reviewers' recommendations.

Both reviewers of our 2024 report recommend "[u]sing Bloom's Action Verbs for Learning Outcomes to create measurable PLOs." We assume that they must be referring only to the first outcome because outcomes two, three, and four all use action verbs from Bloom's taxonomy: "describe," "identify," "explain," and "produce." The only outcome that does not use one of Bloom's action verbs, or any verb for that matter, is the first one, but this is quibbling. The first outcome deals with language proficiency, and we measure proficiency using the ACTFL proficiency scale. This scale makes the outcome inherently measurable. We could add "achieve" to this outcome, but it is not a Bloomian action verb; and it does not make the outcome more measurable.

Another general recommendation in the feedback is that we make "program learning outcomes more specific (or detailed) to increase usefulness." The only comment related to this recommendation is that "[t]he learning outcomes state topic areas but not what is to be learned about them." Ironically, it would be helpful if this comment itself were more specific (or detailed). The definite article ("*the* learning outcomes") seems to imply that this is a problem with all of them. We are aware that the first outcome listed in the report is not specific, but that is because it is a general outcome for all our programs. In a previous year the reviewers requested that we consolidate all our programs in a single report. The first outcome involves language proficiency which varies by program. So in the general outcomes table for the consolidated report, we just list the more general "[Achieve] language proficiency." When we assess this outcome, we list the more specific proficiency levels required by each program. We have tried to make that clear in this year's report. If the reviewers could explain exactly how and why they feel the other outcomes are insufficiently specific, we would be happy to consider their comments. But we would point out that these outcomes are consistent with example outcomes on MSU's assessment website. Outcomes 2 and 3, for example, are similar to an outcome from Microbiology presented in an MSU assessment workshop: "Use knowledge of fundamental terms and concepts of microbiology." And Outcome 4 is essentially the same as another sample outcome from the assessment website: "Pursue research of significance in the discipline."

The same reviewer cited above also states that "[i]n some cases [the outcomes] also feel like bars so low that they might not mean a lot." In spite of the plural "some cases," they only make specific reference to the second outcome. They state that "Describe major periods of historical/cultural production," sounds like an outcome of an intro survey course more than an entire major." The implicit principle that informs this comment is that students must achieve all program learning outcomes through the program as a whole rather than through any individual course, particularly an introductory one. This contradicts MSU's own instructions for creating an assessment plan and for filling out this assessment report. Section 4.c. of the instructions on this very form states that "If you're evaluating more foundational learning outcomes, it's appropriate to focus on lower-division coursework where those outcomes are typically introduced and expected to be achieved earlier in a student's academic progression." The reviewer seems to be unaware that program learning outcomes may include foundational learning outcomes. So this comment seems misguided, and we have not made any changes based on it.

Reviewers also recommend that we "rework rubrics to specify more of what is actually being evaluated." One reviewer asserts that the rubric provides "no criteria … to explain what evaluators were basing their judgment of degree of 'understanding' on, and 'understanding' is itself so general a judgment that it might as well just say 'we know it when we see it.'" The first part of this comment is simply inaccurate, and the second part is misguided. Each numerical score in our rubric has a different descriptor/criterion that explicitly qualifies the "understanding" at that level: "superior understanding," "good understanding," "adequate understanding," "poor understanding," "misunderstanding," and "off

topic." The other reviewer implicitly acknowledges the fact that we do actually distinguish between different degrees of understanding but asks how the threshold value ("adequate understanding") is defined. The implication seems to be that "adequate" is too vague. We disagree. The term "adequate" does not appear in isolation. It derives more specific meaning in this context from its relationship to the other descriptors in the rubric (e.g., "superior," "good," etc.). Some of our faculty members have extensive experience developing and using rubrics. One faculty member has worked for the Educational Testing Service (ETS) creating and using rubrics. Our rubrics are informed by that knowledge and experience. In fact, we modeled the rubric in our 2024 assessment on a rubric used by ETS. All the terms in our rubric are descriptors in ETS's rubric, including "adequate understanding." Moreover, one of the sample rubrics on MSU's assessment website also uses the descriptor "adequate."

With regard to the claim that "understanding" itself is overly general, if we were talking about a learning outcome, the reviewer would have a valid point. But this is a rubric, not a learning outcome. The problem with "understand" in learning outcomes is not that "understanding" is an invalid outcome but rather that it is not itself directly observable. For this reason, outcomes that target "understanding" are formulated in terms of actions that are observable and that *indicate* understanding, such as "identify," "explain," etc. The outcome in this case is "Identify, explain, and use critical terms and concepts …." And the exam that we used for this assessment required students to use literary terms and concepts to identify and analyze the use of literary techniques. Student responses demonstrate how well they *understand* the terms and concepts, and the assessment measures this understanding. Thus "understanding" in the rubric is not problematic. Of course, one can make the same argument about "identify" and "analyze." There are different levels of quality in identifications and analyses as well. At a certain level, there is no getting around this in qualitative assessments. There will always be a certain degree of "we know it when we see it." That is the nature of a qualitative assessment.

In another comment, one reviewer states that "[i]t would be helpful to have a clearer link between the stated exam theme ("identify and analyze literary techniques in works covered in the course"), the outcome ("identify and explain critical terms and concepts"), and the restated outcome in the rubric ("understanding of terms and concepts"). It would be useful if the reviewer explained why they feel that this would be helpful and to whom. Literary and cultural studies has become increasingly interdisciplinary over the last fifty years or so; and as explained above, MLL has programs that focus on both literary/cultural studies and interdisciplinary area studies (Latin American & Latino Studies and Asian Studies). Both the interdisciplinary nature of our programs and the consolidated nature of our assessment plan and report explained above require that the phrasing of some of our learning outcomes be somewhat general. This is why we use the more general phrase "critical terms and concepts" in the program learning outcome. In a course that focuses strictly on literature, these terms and concepts may be primarily literary; in a history course they will be historical. Thus particular assessments designed to measure the general outcome focus on different kinds of terms and concepts, but they all fall under the general category "critical terms and concepts." And when soliciting identification and analysis using passages from texts, it makes no sense to ask students to identify specific literary terms because the terms themselves do not show up in the passages provided. The identification of literary techniques inherently requires the use of literary terms. We do not find any of this to be unclear or problematic.

The reviewers also recommend that we try to "identify complementary methods for assessing this and other PLOs." They say that "[e]xams are useful, but may not give the whole picture." This comment seems to imply that we use exams to assess all of our outcomes. We do not. With regard to this particular outcome, the reviewers imply that they have some idea about other kinds of assessment methods that give a more complete picture of student achievement, but they do not say what those might be. We do not have the same concern about using exams as the sole basis for assessing this outcome, but we would be happy to consider any suggestions if the reviewers could be more specific about what additional methods they have in mind and why they think those methods would be better.

We acknowledge the importance of program assessment. We take very seriously our responsibility to deliver a rigorous education to our students, and we always strive to improve. We would welcome productive conversations about any aspect of our assessment activities, but so far the feedback on our assessment reports has not been productive for the reasons outlined above. The apparent lack of any agreed-upon set of best practices for program assessment (e.g., the nature of learning outcomes, the formulation of rubrics, etc.) and the inconsistencies between MSU's own assessment policies and the reviewer feedback make the feedback virtually useless. Some of the problems described above may be due to disciplinary differences between the reviewers and MLL. If the reviewers are from the sciences, for example, they may be unfamiliar with the nature of qualitative assessments in literary and cultural studies and the humanities more broadly. But some of the problems are more general. Some reviewer comments actually contradict MSU's own assessment instructions. We understand that the reviewers come from the Assessment Committee, but mere membership on that committee in and of itself does not endow them with any special expertise. Based on the feedback, it would appear that they are just random faculty members or administrators giving their own personal opinions. We appreciate the fact that the members of the Assessment Committee dedicate significant time and effort reviewing assessment reports, and we are sure that they do not want their feedback to be a waste any more than we want our assessment to be a waste. We offer these comments in the same spirit in which the Assessment Committee offers its feedback in hopes of making this exercise more meaningful.

Section 2. Institutional Assessment Data Request.

Based on the rationale on the Instructions page, please review your program learning outcomes (PLOs) and identify whether you have PLOs that address the Core Qualities. **There are no right or wrong answers.** Identify 1-2 major-required courses that might have student assignments designed to meet these objectives at least at a surface level. If you cannot identify a course in your program that aligns with this request, please check the appropriate box. At this juncture, this is for information gathering as we plan future institutional assessment endeavors.

Core Quality LOs are Institutional Learning Outcome (ILO)	PLO overlaps with MSU Core Quality	Beginning Level e.g. CORE Courses	Developing Level e.g. list one 200- or 300-level course	Proficient Level e.g. list one 300- or 400-level courses, Capstone, Research (R) Core courses
Thinkers & Problem Solvers	X		FRCH 301, 324; GRMN 301, 302, 303, 304; SPNS 301, 302;	FRCH 499R; GRMN 450R; AS 490R; SPNS 470R
Effective Communicators	X		SPNS 202D, 301, 302; FRCH 202D; 301, 324; GRMN 202D, 301-304; CHIN 202D; JPNS 202D	FRCH 499R; GRMN 450R; SPNS 470R AS 490R; JPNS 305, 340
Local & Global Citizen	X		FRCH 202D; all 300s GRMN 202D; all 300s SPNS 202D; all 300s CHIN & JPNS 202D; all 300s	FRCH 301, 323, 324; GRMN 301-304, 324; SPNS 301, 302, 323, 324, 396 CHIN 300s; JPNS 300s

Section 3. Actionable Research Question for Your Assessment.

Are MLL students able to conduct original research? This involves formulating a research question, conducting bibliographic research, analyzing primary sources, formulating an analytical thesis, and supporting that thesis through argumentation that incorporates secondary sources.

Section 4. Assessment Plan, Schedule, and Data Sources.

a) **Did you change the previously established Assessment Plan Schedule. If yes, how was it changed?**

No

b) **Please provide a multi-year assessment schedule that will show when all program learning outcomes will be assessed, and by what criteria (data). List your PLOs in full for reference.**

ASSESSMENT PLANNING SCHEDULE CHART					
PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME	23-24	24-25	25-26	26-27	Data Source*
1. Achieve program-specific proficiency level on the ACTFL scale.			x		ACTFL assessment of capstone students
2. Identify and describe major periods of cultural production in the Francophone, Hispanic, or Asiatic world.				x	Advanced literature course exams/papers.
3. Identify, explain, and use critical concepts central to program disciplines.	x				Advanced course exams/papers.
4. Produce original research.		x			Capstone papers.

c) What are the threshold values for which your program demonstrates student achievement? Provide a rationale for your threshold values.

Threshold Values		
PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME	Threshold Value	Data Source
1. Achieve program-specific proficiency level on the ACTFL scale.	75% of students attain target proficiency on ACTFL OPI exam.	ACTFL assessment
2. Identify and describe major periods of cultural production in the Francophone, German, Hispanic, or Asiatic world.	75% of students score a 2 or higher on the 3-point rubric.	Adv. course exams/papers
3. Identify, explain, and use critical concepts central to program disciplines.	75% of students score a 2 or higher on the 3-point rubric.	Adv. course exams/papers
4. Produce original research	75% of students score a 2 or higher on the 3-point rubric.	Capstone papers

Rationale for threshold values: The only rationale we used for these threshold values is the fact that the example on the form was 75%. So that is what we put. Is there some principle that should inform the determination of the threshold values? If so, what is it? It should go without saying that we, probably like all other programs, strive for 100%. Of course, that is not always possible, but that is our ideal goal regardless of whatever threshold value is used for assessment reporting. Changing the threshold will have no effect whatsoever on our teaching or assessment.

Section 5. What Was Done?

a) **Self-reporting Metric (required answer): Was the completed assessment consistent with the program's assessment plan? If not, please explain the adjustments that were made.**

☒ **Yes**   ☐ **No**

b) How was the data collected and analyzed and by whom? Please include method of collection and sample size.

The instructors of the capstone courses for each program provided anonymized copies of the research papers produced by their students, 27 essays in all: 7 essays from French; 8 essays from Hispanic Studies & LALS; 9 essays from German; and 2 essays from Asian Studies. Faculty evaluated the essays from their section using the 3-point rubric included in (c) below. Essays receiving 2 or 3 meet expectations. For each essay, we averaged the scores submitted by the faculty. However, in no case did faculty scores differ by more than one point. And after rounding decimal scores (e.g., 1.5), in no case did faculty scores differ with regard to meeting expectations. In other words, scores of 1 were unanimous; all differences involved scores of 2 and 3.

Score	French	German	HS & LALS	MLL total		Asian Studies	
3	7	4	3	14	96%	0	100%
2	0	4	4	8		2	
1	0	1	0	1	4%	0	0%
Total	7	9	7	25		2	

c) Please provide a rubric that demonstrates how your data was evaluated.

3 Excellent
   Structure: Paper has a clear structure with an introduction, body, and conclusion.
   Intro and thesis: The introduction contains a clearly articulated and clearly identifiable thesis that makes an analytical and/or interpretive statement.
   Argument: The analysis has logical validity; the evidence presented clearly supports the thesis; thorough development of the argument.
   Organization: ideas are presented in an organized and logical way
   Secondary sources: secondary sources are incorporated into the analysis in an appropriate way and proportionate to the length of the paper.
   Conclusion: the conclusion discusses the implications of the argument; does not merely restate the thesis.
   Format: accurately follows MLA format; any deviations are minor.

2 Meets expectations
   Structure: Paper has a clear structure with an introduction, body, and conclusion.
   Intro and thesis: The introduction contains a clearly articulated and clearly identifiable thesis. The thesis may lack interpretive explicitness, but the analytical intent is clearly present or can be inferred. If the thesis is on the descriptive side, the discussion/analysis presented in the essay must be good to merit a 2.
   Argument: The analysis presents mostly relevant evidence, but it may not always be tied explicitly to the thesis. Supporting argument may require some inference, but overall argument is effective.
   Organization: may lack some organization, but does not seriously undermine the analysis.
   Secondary sources: secondary sources are mostly incorporated into the analysis in an appropriate way and proportionate to the length of the paper.
   Conclusion: the conclusion may be primarily a restatement of the thesis; may focus on methodological rather than substantive conclusions..
   Format: mostly follows MLA format; may deviate somewhat from standard MLA format, but represents an honest attempt.

1 Does not meet expectations

Structure: Paper may not have a clear structure with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Intro and thesis: The introduction may lack a clearly articulated and clearly identifiable thesis; or the thesis is overly descriptive rather than analytical/interpretive; or thesis is obviously problematic (logically contradictory, unconnected to focus of assignment, etc.).

Argument: The analysis may present some relevant evidence, but the discussion does not effectively support an analytical/interpretive thesis. May be severely underdeveloped requiring significant inferences by the reader and detracting from the overall effectiveness of the argument.

Organization: ideas lack organization; undermines the effectiveness of the analysis.

Secondary sources: may lack sufficient secondary sources; sources may not be incorporated into the paper appropriately.

Conclusion: the conclusion may be a restatement of the thesis; may focus on methodological rather than substantive conclusions; may not tie the thesis and the supporting argument together.

Format: may exhibit a blatant disregard for standard rules of MLA format or formatting is inconsistent.

Section 6. What Was Learned.

a) **Based on the analysis of the data, and compared to the threshold values established, what was learned from the assessment?**

All programs exceeded the target thresholds: French, 100%; German, 89%; Hispanic Studies & LALS, 100%; Asian Studies, 100%.

b) **What areas of strength in the program were identified from this assessment process?**

This assessment process demonstrated that MLL is strong in teaching students how to conduct research.

c) **What areas were identified that either need improvement or could be improved in a different way from this assessment process?**

None. We do not understand the logic of the second part of this question or what it is asking. It implies that the assessment process directly contributes to the improvement of a program. The assessment itself does not improve anything. It merely indicates whether target outcomes are met. If target outcomes are not met, then this inherently means that something must be improved. And that improvement must necessarily involve things other than the assessment process itself.

Section 7. How We Responded.

a) **Describe how "What Was Learned" was communicated to the department, or program faculty.**

As we do every year, the entire department reviewed, analyzed, and discussed the assessment data at our department retreat. One faculty member was tasked with writing up our findings and responding to the questions on the assessment form based on our discussion. That person sent out a draft of our report, and faculty submitted suggestions for revisions. At a subsequent faculty meeting, we discussed the final version and voted to approve it. Since all of this was

done by the department as a whole, there was no need to communicate it to the faculty separately.

How did faculty discussions re-imagine new ways program assessment might contribute to program growth/improvement/innovation beyond the bare minimum of achieving program learning objectives through assessment activities conducted at the course level?

We do not understand exactly what this question is asking. Part of the problem is that it assumes some causal relationships that do not make any sense to us. As in 6(c), the first part of the question suggests that program assessment can contribute to program growth, improvement, or innovation. Program assessment does not contribute directly to program growth, improvement, or innovation. It can certainly indicate where we fall short, and that can prompt improvements that may be innovative; and those improvements may lead to growth. But we can't imagine that this is what the question was meant to ask because this would essentially be the same question asked in 7(b) below.

The second part of the question implies that learning objectives are achieved through assessment activities. We don't follow. Learning objectives are not achieved through assessment activities. They are achieved through effective instruction. Assessment activities merely serve to determine whether or not the objectives are being achieved.

Leaving all this aside, we do not see any way to achieve this learning outcome other than through *instructional* activities conducted at the course level. We don't believe this implies that we are just achieving the bare minimum, but again we aren't sure we even understand the question.

b) **How are the results of this assessment informing changes to enhance student learning in the program?**

n/a. We have developed a proven, highly effective model for teaching students to conduct original research in our capstone courses. So we do not see the need for any change related to this learning outcome.

c) **If information outside of this assessment is informing programmatic changes, please describe that.**

This Is not relevant to the outcome that we assessed during this cycle, but for many years now we have been promoting a new approach to our language curriculum based on the ACTFL proficiency scale. We use this scale to set target proficiency levels for each program and to assess achievement, but it also has curricular and methodological implications. And we have been exploring methodologies that would help us improve our language learning outcomes.

d) **What support and resources (e.g., workshops, training, etc.) might you need to make these adjustments?**

Several obstacles impede our progress in this area. One type of support that would be helpful would be funds to organize training in language teaching methodology and some mechanism for insuring that all of our instructors attend. For everyone to be able to attend, this would have to be done either over spring break or over the summer. In either case, we would need to pay NTT faculty to attend the training. So additional funds to do that would be required as well.

Section 8. Closing the Loop(s).

Reflect on the program learning outcomes, how they were assessed in the previous cycle (refer to #1 of the report), and what was learned in this cycle about any actions stemming from the previous cycle.

a) **Self-Reporting Metric (required answer): Based on the findings and/or faculty input, will there be any changes made (such as plans for measurable improvements, realignment of learning outcomes, curricular changes, etc.) in preparation for upcoming assessments?**

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Yes ☐   **No** ☒

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b) **In reviewing the last report that assessed the PLO(s) in this assessment cycle, what changes proposed were implemented and will be measured in future assessment reports?**

In the last assessment cycle, no changes were proposed per se. All faculty just needed to do a better job of teaching the capstone course by better implementing the model that we use.

What action will be taken to improve student learning objectives going forward?

We will continue to make sure faculty understand how to implement effectively our model for the capstone research seminar.

c) **Have you seen a change in student learning based on other program adjustments made in the past? Please describe the adjustments made and subsequent changes in student learning.**

This year's assessment demonstrates that we have improved student learning significantly in comparison to the assessment of this outcome in 2019. In 2019, we did not meet the target threshold. This year, we far surpassed it. This improvement has nothing to do with our curriculum. Rather, it is due to the fact that we did a better job of implementing the framework for the capstone course. As a result, students did a much better job producing original research.

d) **If the program sees anything emerging from this assessment cycle that it anticipates would be a factor or an item of discussion in its 7-year program review cycle, please use this space to document that for future reference.**

n/a.

Submit report to programassessment@montana.edu
Update Department program assessment report website.
Update PLO language in CIM if needed (Map PLOs to Course LOs)