“Humanities Learning Initiative” in the German Department

A Report to CNDLS for “Closing the Loop”-grant

The German Department began the Humanities Learning Initiative as a result of on-going conversations about the role of assessment with a number of other institutions, most especially the Center for the Study of Languages & Cultures at the University of Notre Dame (UND) and UND’s Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, as well as the Language Center at Emory University. The Initiative is a further iteration of on-going assessment projects in the German Department tied to regular curricular work and review. Previous facets of on-going attention to assessment centered on placement testing, oral proficiency attainment of students in our restructured curriculum, the writing development of our students, and program assessment based on the opinions of current students, current majors, and alumni. These efforts are detailed at:

http://www1.georgetown.edu/departments/german/programs/undergraduate/curriculum/assessment/)

The Humanities Assessment Initiative proceeded in what has become the German Department’s customary approach to such initiatives. All faculty members as well as all graduate students were invited to participate. The self-selected group, at times enlarged by other members who did not want to be centrally involved but who wanted to stay abreast of developments, met regularly and reported back to the Department.

Over the course of multiple semesters, the group identified three humanities learning goals – (a) content learning; (b) multiple perspectives on that content goal; (c) a self-reflective stance toward the students’ existing viewpoints as learners at an American university – and developed a rating sheet that was used to assess 39 essays written by students at the end of the advanced German sequence (GERM 102 or GERM 111). At multiple points in the process, we relied on the help of outside consultants (Prof. John Norris and Yukiko Watanabe) from the University of Hawai’i to help us better understand the issues we were grappling with. These consultants were funded through the “Closing the Loop”-grant.

The essays were rated by four raters; two with experience teaching at the advanced level, two without such experience. (Student raters were paid through the grant.) The four raters met multiple times to agree on a common rating for the essays. Results were tabulated and descriptors extracted for the top, the middle, and the low rated essays. One undergraduate student participated through GUROP and will continue to work for the project.
Moving forward, we will move toward a detailed semantic-linguistic analysis of the essays. The first step will be coding the 39 essays for specific language features so that the analysis can begin. This coding – paid for by grant funds – will be done by three graduate students over the first part of the summer. Some preliminary results of the initial analysis will be presented by Prof. Marianna Ryshina at a systemic functional linguistics conference in Sidney, Australia, at the end of the summer. Prof. Ryshina and Prof. Heidi Byrnes are also planning a jointly authored article drawing on these data for *Journal of Second Language Writing*.

The assessment also had direct consequences for the teaching of the course. The discussions of the essays have led to adjustments in the task sheet for the writing assignment and the pedagogies that guide students to this final essay in the advanced sequence.