

“Assessing the Foreign Language Requirement of the Core Curriculum:
Maximizing the Student Learning Experience”

J. McClanahan, Ph.D.
Chair, Core Curriculum Committee
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures
jose@creighton.edu / 280-3868

Abstract:

Following the recommendations of the Higher Education Commission during the recent accreditation process, the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures (MLL) plans to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the *languages* requirement of the Undergraduate Core Curriculum. Since the approval of the Core in 1993, MLL has gone through many changes in the manner and scope of instruction at the core-level. Therefore, an evaluation of our current curriculum is important and necessary in order to keep with the spirit of the educational principles of the Core Curriculum. This assessment will be achieved through a thorough examination and analysis of students' abilities at the intermediate language-level in relationship to the outlined learning objectives. Moreover, MLL will determine what changes, if any, need to be implemented in order to guarantee adherence and maximum success of undergraduate students in these language-learning objectives.

When the College of Arts and Sciences adopted the Undergraduate Core Curriculum in 1993, one of the key sections addressed the learning of languages. The purpose of including languages in the Core was to emphasize the importance of students "[being] able to communicate in languages other than their native language, and to grow in the understanding of other cultures" (27). Taking into account that fifteen years have passed since the adoption and implementation of the language portion of the Core Curriculum, it is now necessary for a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of the success of meeting these goals. At the time, the College of Arts and Sciences outlined two specific learning objectives for the languages: 1) To acquire knowledge of the fundamentals of a language needed for a basic level of communication, and 2) to develop an awareness of another culture through its language (27).

Currently, the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures (MLL) offers six languages in which students are able to meet the core requirement for *languages*: French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. These courses are taught at the 201-intermediate level and carry three credits, meeting three days a week. While the learning objectives of the Core are understood, they have not gone under a formal assessment since their implementation to determine whether or not students are successfully meeting them.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess MLL students' abilities at the end of the intermediate level to understand to what extent they are realizing the learning objectives as established by the Core. For this assessment, we envision a four-part process. Firstly, we will develop a proper tool for assessment that clearly identifies the learning objective of the Core as well as the objectives for the specific course. This examination will be substantive in nature to be inclusive of the guidelines set out by ACTFL (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages) for intermediate level of proficiency in reading, writing, and listening, and it will include the required cultural awareness component. At this time, we will not be assessing speaking ability due to time constraints, but will look how we might be able to include this piece in future examinations. Secondly, we will administer the exam to a representative sampling of our 201-level students. Given the timing and the understanding that this is the first true assessment of their abilities, it is more effective to use only a sampling of students. Afterwards and in subsequent semesters, we can look toward a larger pool of students. Thirdly, we will analyze the results to see what objectives have been met and to what degree. This analysis will provide important data as we look to any modifications to the established program. Fourthly, we will make substantiated recommendations to MLL for future programmatic adjustments and/or modifications that will guarantee our success in meeting the Core learning objectives.

The timeline for completing of this study will be as follows:

- *February to March 15* – Research and design of assessment tool (exam)
- *March 15-31* – Examination of the sampling of 201-level students
- *April* – Analysis of results included in the report of findings and recommendations for future actions

As Chair of the Core Curriculum Committee in MLL, I am requesting the maximum award of \$2000.00. These funds will help to defray the costs of purchasing research materials for designing the level appropriate exams, creating the exams [by myself (Spanish) and my colleagues in the different languages], and the analysis of the results [myself]. Once the initial exams are created, any future modifications and adaptations to them will not require as much time and effort on the part of faculty and as a result, these future costs will be absorbed by the department.

After MLL has received the results of the initial study, we intend to conduct further examinations in the semesters following any curricular adaptations based upon the recommendations of the comprehensive assessment of the MLL study for the Core language program. These successive assessments will confirm and monitor our progress toward realizing our learning objectives and outcomes. Both the initial and future assessments will offer continuous feedback to MLL and provide comparative data and information for us to develop and institute the required changes. In addition to our departmental benefit, students will receive feedback, showing their level of learning and how they have progressed through the language courses.

This study is vital for understanding how our students are performing at the intermediate core-level, and how, as a department, we can best service our students' education. Furthermore, MLL has recently gone under a complete revision of the major programs in French, German, and Spanish, and this assessment will provide the department with invaluable data as we look to clearly articulate learning objectives throughout all levels of the curriculum. Moreover, it will provide all faculty members the opportunity to understand the importance of the core curriculum and its connection to the major and minor – culminating in the necessary adaptations to maximize our students' learning.