

Program-Level Assessment: Annual Report

Program Name (no acronyms): American Studies	Department: American Studies
Degree or Certificate Level: Ph.D.	College/School: College of Arts and Sciences
Date (Month/Year): 09/2021	Assessment Contact: Emily Lutenski, Chair (emily.lutenski@slu.edu)
In what year was the data upon which this report is based collected? Spring 2018-Fall 2020	
In what year was the program’s assessment plan most recently reviewed/updated? The most recent assessment plan is dated 2020; the department will revise the Ph.D. assessment plan during the 2021-2022 academic year, along with the Graduate Certificate, B.A., and M.A. assessment plans.	

1. Student Learning Outcomes

Which of the program’s student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle? (Please list the full, complete learning outcome statements and not just numbers, e.g., Outcomes 1 and 2.)

Student Learning Outcome 4: Assess relevant literature or scholarly contributions in three chosen fields in American Studies.

2. Assessment Methods: Artifacts of Student Learning

Which artifacts of student learning were used to determine if students achieved the outcome(s)? Please describe and identify the course(s) in which these artifacts were collected. Clarify if any such courses were offered a) online, b) at the Madrid campus, or c) at any other off-campus location.

Written comprehensive exams were used to determine if students achieved this outcome. This is not a dedicated course, but a benchmark in the doctoral process. The following is an excerpt from the description of the written exams from our graduate handbook:

Comprehensive Exams

Written Exam

After completing the qualifying exam, students create a faculty committee composed of three field directors, one of whom the student designates as the committee chair. Working closely with the committee members, students develop three literature-review papers, each based in intensive reading in a discrete field or subject area.

3. Assessment Methods: Evaluation Process

What process was used to evaluate the artifacts of student learning, and by whom? Please identify the tools(s) (e.g., a rubric) used in the process and **include them in/with this report document** (do not just refer to the assessment plan).

After the written exam is completed (at the time of the oral exam, which takes place at least 16 days afterwards), each committee member completes a rubric and returns it to the department’s Graduate Coordinator. The written exam rubric is included here (Appendix A). The committee members assess only the field that they oversaw for the

written exam. Both rubrics are rated on the following scale: 5: Excellent, 4: Good, 3: Acceptable, 2: Poor, 1: Unacceptable.

4. Data/Results

What were the results of the assessment of the learning outcome(s)? Please be specific. Does achievement differ by teaching modality (e.g., online vs. face-to-face) or on-ground location (e.g., STL campus, Madrid campus, other off-campus site)?

This cycle, we compiled data from 18 rated rubrics submitted from Spring 2018-Fall 2020.

On the first point on the rubric, "Identifies major arguments and themes in listed texts," students rated from 3 (Acceptable) to 5 (Excellent), with an overall average rating of 4.3.

On the second point in the rubric, "Demonstrates knowledge of scholarly debates or interpretive differences," students rated from 2 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent), with an overall average rating of 4.1.

On the third point on the rubric, "Analyzes and synthesizes scholarship in chosen fields," students rated from 3 (Acceptable) to 5 (Excellent), with an overall average rating of 4.1.

On the fourth point on the rubric, "Composes prose free of errors in grammar, mechanics, usage, and style," students rated from 3 to 5, with an overall average rating of 4.2.

On the fifth point on the rubric, "Conveys complicated ideas clearly," students rated from 3 to 5, with an overall average rating of 3.9.

On the final point on the rubric, "Articulates convincing case for the field's significance to American Studies," students rated from 2 to 5, with an overall average rating of 3.8.

These exams are only completed in-person in St. Louis, and therefore are not affected by modality.

5. Findings: Interpretations & Conclusions

What have you learned from these results? What does the data tell you?

This rubric was developed to assess two learning outcomes, the one being addressed in this cycle (SLO 4: Assess relevant literature or scholarly contributions in three chosen fields within American Studies) and SLO 3: Articulate arguments or explanations to a disciplinary or professional audience in written form. There is some lack of clarity regarding what points on the rubric are meant to address what outcome, although it seems clear that the fourth point is meant to address SLO 3, so will be disregarded here.

What we can deduce from the data above is that students are, in general, writing literature reviews that adequately demonstrate their knowledge of and orientation to three distinct subspecialties within American Studies. They seem to evidence comprehension of the texts at hand, the interventions and positionings that create scholarly dialogues, and can bring these together in a coherent, analytical piece of writing. At the same time, they seem to have the most trouble orienting their fields to the discipline of American Studies as a whole.

6. Closing the Loop: Dissemination and Use of Current Assessment Findings

A. When and how did your program faculty share and discuss these results and findings from this cycle of assessment?

The findings of this cycle of assessment were shared and discussed with all faculty at a routine department meeting near the beginning of the Fall 2021 semester; future meetings and conversations throughout the Fall 2021-Spring 2022 academic year will focus on refining assessment practices in tandem with an intensive focus on curriculum review and refinement within the department.

B. How specifically have you decided to use these findings to improve teaching and learning in your program? For example, perhaps you've initiated one or more of the following:

Changes to the Curriculum or Pedagogies

- Course content
- Teaching techniques
- Improvements in technology
- Prerequisites
- Course sequence
- New courses
- Deletion of courses
- Changes in frequency or scheduling of course offerings

Changes to the Assessment Plan

- Student learning outcomes
- Artifacts of student learning
- Evaluation process
- Evaluation tools (e.g., rubrics)
- Data collection methods
- Frequency of data collection

Please describe the actions you are taking as a result of these findings.

While these findings have been disseminated at a faculty meeting, they merit additional dialogues, and these are planned for throughout the Fall 2021-Spring 2022 academic year, during which we hope to engage in serious reflection about the curricula of all of our programs and our assessment practices. This report helps to set that agenda. While the Ph.D. comprehensive exams seem to be functional in terms of eliciting student comprehension of scholarly sources, students also appear to leave them tentative about making field-level claims and interventions. Faculty could consider whether creating a clearer prompt for the literature reviews associated with the comprehensive exams would help students more clearly articulate the relationship between a subfield and the American Studies enterprise as a whole. This may have the added effect of streamlining the exams process and aiding students to make more efficient progress through a period of study that can be difficult for them.

Faculty will also have further conversations about the assessment plan for the Ph.D. after completing this cycle of assessment. First, there are a handful of changes that need to be addressed in the rubric we used here. For example, defining "Excellent," "Good," "Acceptable," "Poor," and "Unacceptable" is necessary to improve rater reliability.

Secondly, this rubric was designed with two outcomes in mind, the one being addressed here (SLO 4), and another (SLO 3), which is to "Articulate arguments or explanations to a disciplinary or professional audience in written form." This means that the space on the rubric for an "Average Score" should be eliminated, because it collapses two outcomes that we should be examining in isolation. This also means it is somewhat unclear based on the rubric alone which point in the rubric is meant to apply to which learning outcome, even as it is clear that not all of the points on this rubric seem necessary to assess the outcome (SLO 4) addressed in this year's assessment cycle.

For example, point four, "Composes prose free of errors in grammar, mechanics, usage, and style," is important—but not in order to "Assess relevant literature or scholarly contributions in three chosen fields within American Studies." Separate rubrics need to be developed for separate outcomes and applied to appropriate artifacts at the most advanced point in a student's degree program in order to ensure the program as whole is working as it should. For this reason and others, the dissertation, for example, may be the better place to assess "Composes prose free of errors in grammar, mechanics, usage, and style." It may also be the more appropriate place to assess "Articulates a convincing case for the field's significance"—or, in the case of a dissertation, the project's significance—"to American Studies." That is ultimately a big ask of students and may be better reflected when the student is exiting the program, rather than in the transitional stage between coursework and dissertation.

Furthermore, the current assessment plan calls for us to also use the oral exam to assess SLO 4. While we have rubrics available to do so, and have completed them, to also assess the oral exam for this particular outcome seems redundant if we can capture better data about student achievement from the written exam alone, as we did here. We might consider eliminating such redundancies in order to focus on assessment at more appropriate points in order to gather data about the efficacy of our Ph.D. program. Streamlining the assessment process and making it more meaningful at the same time will both increase faculty investment in the process and the nimbleness with which we can make adjustments to our curriculum should our assessment findings warrant it.

On oral exams in particular: while oral exams have utility, they may be better employed to assess (in part) achievement of our Learning Outcome 4: Articulate arguments or explanations to a disciplinary or professional audience and to a general audience, in both oral and written forms. Throughout this academic year, the faculty should also consider whether this outcome could be better framed as two—or even four—different outcomes: To articulate arguments to a disciplinary audience in written form; to articulate arguments to a disciplinary audience in oral form; to articulate arguments to a general audience in written form; to articulate arguments to a general audience in oral form. The latter two—about articulating arguments to a general audience—should be discussed by faculty as an object of the Ph.D., and faculty must consider whether this is a necessary outcome of the degree or merely advantageous. If necessary, where in the degree program could it routinely be addressed?

These are some of the points the faculty will take up as it redesigns its assessment plans throughout the Fall 2021-Spring 2022 academic year and considers changes to its Ph.D. program.

If no changes are being made, please explain why.

N/A

7. Closing the Loop: Review of Previous Assessment Findings and Changes

A. What is at least one change your program has implemented in recent years as a result of assessment data?

In last year's assessment report, the department described that the first-year exam for Ph.D. students was not providing evidence that students could sufficiently "Define and explain interdisciplinary approaches in American Studies." It surmised that the first-year exam is not the appropriate place to assess this, and that this outcome should be assessed later in a student's degree program.

This year, we will have further discussion about whether the first-year exam has utility in our program or should be eliminated. This is because students are clearly still developing at the early stage in the program when they take the exam. If the purpose of the first-year exam is assessment and we want to know if our program as a whole is working, this is another case where it may have merit to assess student work produced as late in the degree program as possible, which would mean looking at artifacts such as the dissertation to illustrate Ph.D. students' mastery of our outcomes rather than work like the a first-year exam.

B. How has this change/have these changes been assessed?

This change has not been implemented yet but will be discussed and possibly implemented as part of our review and revision of our assessment plans and curricula during the Fall 2021-Spring 2022 academic year.

C. What were the findings of the assessment?

N/A

D. How do you plan to (continue to) use this information moving forward?

In general, we think that the suggestion that we may be assessing too early is useful to consider as we revise our Ph.D. assessment plan and those of our other programs. It makes little sense to judge the efficacy of our programs as a whole at moments when students have only gotten a taste of them. As an alternative to this, we surmise that we can create a robust assessment plan that addresses nearly all our outcomes when applied to the culminating experiences of our degree programs—from the dissertation to the senior capstone paper—rather than from artifacts collected earlier.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any assessment tools (e.g., rubrics) with this report as separate attachments or copied and pasted into this Word document. Please do not just refer to the assessment plan; the report should serve as a stand-alone document.

Appendix A: American Studies Ph.D. SLO 4 Assessment Rubric

Literature Review **WRITTEN** Rubric

Assessment Use Only

Submit to American Studies Graduate Coordinator

Student: _____

Date: _____

Field Topic: _____

Learning Objectives:

LO 3: Articulate arguments or explanations to a disciplinary or professional audience in written form.

LO 4: Assess relevant literature or scholarly contributions in three chosen fields within American Studies.

Written Assessment Instructions

1. Read the literature review for the field you assigned
2. Fill out the table below using the following rubric and scale

Scale: 5= Excellent; 4= Good; 3= Acceptable; 2= Poor; 1= Unacceptable.

	Score
Identifies major arguments and themes in listed texts	
Demonstrates knowledge of scholarly debates or interpretive differences	
Analyzes and synthesizes scholarship in chosen fields	
Composes prose free of errors in grammar, mechanics, usage, and style	
Conveys complicated ideas clearly	
Articulates convincing case for the project's significance to American Studies.	

Average Score: _____

Reviewer's Initials: _____