

Program-Level Assessment: Annual Report

Program: **CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

Department: **Educational Studies**

Degree or Certificate Level: **Ph.D.**

College/School: **School of Education**

Date (Month/Year): **October 15, 2021**

Primary Assessment Contact: **Jennifer Buehler, Program Director**

In what year was the data upon which this report is based collected? **Spring and Summer 2021**

In what year was the program's assessment plan most recently reviewed/updated? **Plan has not yet been updated (see #7D)**

1. Student Learning Outcomes

Which of the program's student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle?

Last year's program assessment report (dated December 17, 2020) detailed findings from a faculty review of the first round of implementation (during Summer and Fall 2020) of a **new written comprehensive exam model** for Curriculum & Instruction and Special Education doctoral students.

Note that since that time, the Ph. D program in Special Education has been **closed** as a result of the provost's Academic Program Review process, and faculty have been engaged in ongoing conversation about **redesign** of the Ph.D. program in Curriculum & Instruction.

Also note that **faculty turnover**, which has included the departure of three colleagues (RM, JV, and DR) and the hiring of a new colleague (CJ), means our team is small – just six faculty members (JB, JN, KMP, AC, RC, and CJ). Program redesign work is still ongoing. The Ph.D. redesign process will continue through the 2021-22 school year with the expectation of a new curriculum ready to submit in Fall 2022.

For these reasons, we have not focused program assessment at the coursework level. Instead, this year's assessment report will present findings from faculty review of the **second round of written comprehensive exam implementation** (during Spring and Summer 2021), with implications for program redesign.

The continuing review of the written comps exam model focused specifically around **two of our five learning outcomes**:

- Outcome #3: Students will analyze social justice issues in education.
- Outcome #4: Students will explain how learning and curriculum theories are used to develop education programs.

2. Assessment Methods: Artifacts of Student Learning

Which artifacts of student learning were used to determine if students achieved the outcome(s)? Please 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.

NOTE: Since the written comprehensive exam is the sole focus of this round of program assessment, no artifacts were collected through coursework.

NOTE: There are no Madrid students enrolled in our program.

The written comprehensive exam model consists of **two long papers** that students write over a five-week period and then defend in a **two-hour oral exam** before a **three-person faculty comps committee**.

The Scholarly Paper, which is adapted from exam models used at the University of Michigan, Stanford University, and the University of Virginia, and which is based on the student's primary academic interest, provides space for the student to explore an area of scholarly interest that is relevant to the research they expect to conduct for their dissertation. In

this paper, the student demonstrates their capacity to do independent research of publishable quality.

The Theorization of Learning Paper, which is adapted from a model used at the University of Michigan, and which is autobiographical and narrative in nature, provides space for the student to produce a critical reading of their work in graduate school. In this paper, the student creates a coherent intellectual trajectory out of their program of study and explores the implications of this work for their dissertation and career.

Each **three-person comps committee** consists of the Program Director, the student's faculty adviser, and a second faculty member assigned by the Program Director.

The following **data/artifacts** related to the written comps exam model were included for this round of assessment:

- The Scholarly Paper and the Theorization of Learning Paper for one spring student and one summer student (4 papers in all, each 15-20 pages in length)
- Comments on each student's papers by their committee members
- Field notes written by the Program Director during each student's oral exam (essentially handwritten transcripts of the exam conversation, approximately 25 pages for each student)
- The results forms for each student, which include summary comments on the overall quality of their work on each paper (these comments are written by the Program Director at the end of the oral exam and submitted to the SOE Program Coordinator for the student's permanent file)

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.

Eight Educational Studies faculty members – which included all full-time graduate faculty members from the Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction and the Ph.D. in Special Education (JB, JN, KMP, AC, RC, RM, JV, and DR) – participated in the development, implementation, and assessment of the new comps model.

Four of those eight members (RM, JN, KMP, JB) participated directly in the comps process during Spring and Summer 2021.

The evaluation process occurred during **two oral exams** (one held in May and the other in July), **and faculty meetings** held in February, March, April, and September. Discussion focused on the following questions:

- What do the new comps artifacts, in comparison to comps artifacts collected in Summer 2020 and Fall 2020, **tell us in general** about student learning in our program?
- What do the comps artifacts tell us specifically about student learning related to **outcome #3** (Students will analyze social justice issues in education)?
- What do the comps artifacts tell us specifically about student learning related to **outcome #4** (Students will explain how learning and curriculum theories are used to develop education programs)?
- What do the comps artifacts **tell us about gaps and weaknesses** in our program and things students are NOT able to do around these outcomes?

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)?

Discussion of the written comprehensive exam data yielded the following "major findings," all of which have led to modifications of the exam model, all of which speak to the continuing power of the model, and several of which speak

to implications for program redesign.

General findings

- **The Scholarly Paper needs to be targeted to a specific journal that is relevant to that student's program of research.** If students write the Scholarly Paper in response to a specific call for manuscripts in a specific journal, then the exam will provide a tangible space for students to engage in academic writing for a specific purpose, audience, and publication venue. Modeling their work on the style, format, and literature being cited in a specific journal provides students with a concrete learning opportunity regarding academic writing; it also positions students to get a publication out of their Scholarly Paper if they choose to pursue this option. Most important, it makes the intellectual tasks of narrowing their topic and responding to a gap in the literature more concrete.

We saw Student 2 (Summer 2021) reap the rewards of this approach by preparing his Scholarly Paper as a submission to the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, which specifically mentioned methodological reviews in its call for manuscripts.

- **The Theorization Paper needs to be grounded in a specific theoretical framework.** This paper needs to be more than a chronological account of what the student has done in graduate school. By using a theoretical framework to interpret experiences in the program and the developmental changes the student has undergone, the paper becomes a thematic treatment of their experience – it becomes a true theorization of learning. Identifying a theoretical framework and putting it to use requires deeper level thinking and reflection.

We saw Student 2 (Summer 2021) reap the rewards of this approach by interpreting experiences in his Theorization Paper through the lens of Elder's (1998) life course theory and Lerner et al.'s (2010) developmental systems perspective on continuity and discontinuity in development.

- **The exam process has tangible implications for the direction and shape of the student's dissertation.** The personal nature of the *planning* process (which is done in consultation with the student's adviser), the *writing* process (which is done independently), and the *oral* process (which is done with a three-person faculty committee) yields concrete information for both students and faculty members. The exam serves as a formative experience that has real consequences for how the student understands "the work she is uniquely positioned to do" and the nature of the scholarly work she is prepared to produce. Students gain clarity about options and potential pathways for the next stage of the program, which is the dissertation proposal, and their career as a whole.

This finding raises questions about the role of the Research Topics course in our program. The research topics course is typically taken by all doctoral students in the School of Education; students write the first three chapters of their dissertation in this course. If the comps process occurs simultaneously with student enrollment in Research Topics, or, worse, *after* students have taken Research Topics, then students risk wasting effort by writing three chapters of a dissertation that may change in focus or design as a result of comps.

- **The exam process illuminates for faculty members in a very personal and individualized way who the students are in the program.** This personal knowledge of students is about more than their personalities and biographies; it is about their individual research identities and professional goals. Through comps, we are now able to know our students much more deeply through the work they produce at this juncture in the program. We are able to use this knowledge to guide students more intentionally into the next stage of their work, which is the dissertation proposal. The written comprehensive exam essentially introduces us to students as the researchers they are becoming *before they commit* to a dissertation topic and design. The conversation during the oral exam focuses on how the student can channel the best of what they have done as a thinker and a scholar into the dissertation phase.
- **The exam process has implications for future student recruitment.** The exam process also has implications for how we understand the audience we are best suited to serve in this program. Each pair of exam papers provides faculty members with space to reflect on what the program prepares students to do, in terms of the contributions students are positioned to make academically and professionally when they graduate. As we make program design changes in service of setting students up to do work that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant, the comps process keeps the conversation focused and concrete. It also prepares us to

talk more concretely with prospective students about who the program attracts, what students do once they get here, and what the program is designed to accomplish.

Findings related to outcome #3 (Students will analyze social justice issues in education)

- **Social justice concerns showed up both directly and indirectly in student artifacts.** Some students addressed social justice issues *directly* in the content of their exam papers. For example, Student 2 (Summer 2021) used the Theorization of Learning paper to trace “continuities and discontinuities” in his development as a researcher committed to social justice. Without the space of this paper, faculty members would not be able to see how the student is making sense of social justice as a thread that extends throughout his entire career in education, and how he is making decisions about his work in the program to develop and refine this thread.

Students also addressed social justice issues *indirectly* during the exam process. For example, Student 1 (Spring 2021) used the Theorization of Learning paper (and the conversation during the oral exam) to connect the current “humanist orientation” he brings to his work as a lab scientist to his history as a student in Jesuit schools, his time spent training for the Jesuit order, his missionary work, and his experiences with international travel. Faculty members were able to see how this background informs the student’s ongoing general social justice commitments, even though those commitments were not actively developed and refined during coursework.

- **Community connections and/or co-curricular experiences, often established long before students begin their work in the program, played a crucial role in students’ approach to analyzing social justice issues in education.** On a program level, faculty members continue to be struck by the way social justice emphases are arising in student work not from the intentional design of our program, but instead from the personal and professional histories they bring. Our program attracts students with a social justice orientation, but we are not doing enough to help them develop this orientation and activate it in their academic work once they get here.
- **Social justice concerns were not centered intentionally in the comps task.** As we reported in December 2020, the fact that social justice issues came up at all in students’ comps papers was a result of individual student interests, values, research questions, and contexts. At no point in our comps process or in the program as a whole do we require a lens of social justice (e.g., for the scholarly or practical application work students complete), nor do we intentionally model what that work can look like. This is something we are in a position to change as we engage in program redesign.

Findings related to outcome #4 (Students will explain how learning and curriculum theories are used to develop education programs)

- **Students take a *personal stance* on learning and curriculum theories through the new comps model.** Because each student had to define an area of scholarly interest, work with research literature in their field to intervene in a scholarly conversation, and narrate the relevance of this work to their larger professional story, the new comps model shows us how effectively students are able to *synthesize* their knowledge of learning and curriculum theories and *put their knowledge to use* in accordance with their individual interests, values, research questions, and contexts.
- **Beyond *explaining* learning and curriculum theories, students actively use those theories to shape, inform, and guide their sense of scholarly identity.** This is becoming more apparent as we observe students use learning and curriculum theories to frame the story they tell in the Theorization of Learning paper. The comps model is giving us insight into how we can guide students to use learning and curriculum theories as they develop their *sense of self*. In addition, we can guide them to use these theories in work they are doing for education programs.

Gaps and weaknesses in our program

- **Students arrive with uneven preparation and uneven readiness for doctoral level work.** Differences in academic skill and training make it hard to hold students to the same standard of quality when it comes to academic writing. Our program in its current form is not set up to differentiate through coursework and/or program tracks. We are now in conversation about how to revise the program so that we are able to serve local teachers who wish to remain in the classroom *as well as* individuals who wish to be prepared for the academic

job market. Doing both will take a very strategic program design; we have begun a conversation about what this might look like.

- **Some students struggle to write for a scholarly audience.** Our coursework at this point does not intentionally prepare students for the tasks of responding to calls for manuscripts, identifying gaps in the literature, and developing original interventions in their research area. These are not new revelations; we identified versions of these same weaknesses in our first round of program assessment focused on the new comps model (e.g., students struggle to identify a research problem and develop research questions; students are learning that lit reviews are really hard; students (at least some) don't think of themselves as researchers). We are now in conversation about how to structure the revised program around a first year proseminar experience (which will likely be a shared experience with students in the Education Policy and Equity doctoral program) that foregrounds these skills and orientations.

5. Findings: Interpretations & Conclusions

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

Our assessment work on comps suggests findings in three areas that could inform the development of a new “practitioner” doctoral degree:

- **Regarding community connections and/or co-curricular experiences.** While all of our students have access to classrooms in some form during their doctoral study – whether as teachers in classrooms of their own, practicum students working in the classrooms of others, or graduate teaching assistants working with undergraduate teacher education students in local schools – ***we need to build in an intentional plan for all students to access community contexts, along with school contexts***, during their program of study if we want students to engage more intentionally in social justice analyses in education. Structured internships may provide a way forward and may ultimately distinguish our program from others in the area.

To this end, the program director spent the Spring 2021 semester in one-on-one conversations with stakeholders at four local organizations (Forward Through Ferguson, WE POWER, St. Louis Black Authors of Children’s Literature, and the Education Equity Center of St. Louis) about ideas for the design of a structured community internship and the possibility of working in reciprocal partnership around this goal. These conversations are ongoing.

- **Regarding students’ ability to identify a research problem and develop research questions.** Students’ struggles with basic research skills have long been apparent to those of us who guide students through dissertation projects. This problem has not been limited to our doctoral programs in Curriculum & Instruction and Special Education; rather, it is pervasive in the School of Education. Under the leadership of our Associate Dean, we spent Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 undertaking ***a systematic review of the qualitative research course sequence***, including a review of syllabi, a student survey, and a focus group with students who are currently at the dissertation stage.

As of October 2021, we are in discussion of a draft proposal for a new qualitative course sequence that we hope to be ready to implement in 2022-23.

- **Regarding lit reviews.** The scholarly paper is fundamentally rooted in literature review work, as is the dissertation proposal, and yet some students are doing this work for the first time when they reach these stages of the program. Seeing them struggle at this juncture suggests that ***students need more mini-lit review experiences prior to comps***. Integrating different kinds of literature review work, with different focuses and for different purposes, during the coursework phase of the program will strengthen students’ skills and prepare them to do stronger work in their scholarly paper and on their dissertation proposal. This will need to be a continuing focus as we redesign the degree around new core coursework.
- **Regarding developing and “owning” a researcher identity.** Since the Ph.D. is a research degree, we have long wondered what it means for classroom teachers to earn a Ph.D. if those same teachers don’t transition from K-12 education to pursue tenure track faculty jobs.

In Spring 2021, the program director met with local educational stakeholders around the topic of program redesign. One stakeholder (IB) proposed the idea of a program organized around the vision of producing “**thought leaders**” who develop their knowledge and expertise in the SLU School of Education and then plow their learning back into the local community.

The idea of producing “thought leaders” is one that has stuck. Faculty members discussed this concept during monthly meetings throughout Spring 2021, and the conversation has continued in Fall 2021. We have explored the idea of **interdisciplinary coursework** as it might support “out of the box” thinking about educational paradigms and problems of practice.

To that end, the program director held one-on-one meetings in Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 with department chairs, program directors, and deans representing fourteen campus units to assess the viability of interdisciplinary coursework as a pillar of the redesigned degree. In departments ranging from African American Studies to Philosophy, in programs/schools including Social Work, Business, and Law, the response to our request for interdisciplinary collaboration was uniformly positive.

We are still in the middle of discussion and planning around this idea; our work in program redesign will continue through the 2021-22 school year.

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?

Implications from this cycle of assessment continue to inform our program redesign conversation – most recently at our September 2021 faculty meeting.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course content• Teaching techniques• Improvements in technology• Prerequisites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course sequence• New courses• Deletion of courses• Changes in frequency or scheduling of course offerings
Changes to the Assessment Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student learning outcomes• Artifacts of student learning• Evaluation process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.

See the findings, and related implications for program and course revisions, reported in the discussion for question #5.

In sum, we will use these findings from this round of program assessment in three ways:

1. Continuing visioning work to build a **new Ph.D. program** for practitioners. This program will blend our old programs in Curriculum & Instruction and Special Education. It will likely be organized around the pillars of interdisciplinary coursework, “producing thought leaders,” and supporting students in “structured community internship.” (TBD in 2021-22)
2. Ongoing redesign work on the scope and sequence of our **qualitative research courses** (currently underway)
3. Curriculum mapping work that will lead us to include **literature review assignments** in and across our graduate courses. (TBD in 2021-22)

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?

The entire story of our new comps model is a result of our work in the assessment process during 2019-20. We continue to refine the comps model with each group of students that writes exams.

Similarly, as presented in question #5, assessment work has led to outreach work with stakeholders across campus (14) and in the community (4) in service of a new innovative program design.

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

Developing a new comps model was the first tangible within-program change we made as a result of program assessment work. We will continue to assess the effectiveness of this part of our program as we continue with the doctoral program reinvention process in the coming year.

Program redesign work will yield a new curriculum and a new assessment plan that takes into account program components such as interdisciplinary coursework, structured community internship, a proseminar for first year students, and other elements as we develop them.

C. What were the findings of the assessment?

See the discussion outlined in question #4.

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

Comments below from our last report remain relevant as we continue the program redesign process:

As we see our Ph.D. program in Special Education close due to the Academic Program Review process, and as we undertake redesign of our Ph.D. program in Curriculum & Instruction, we will use all of the information detailed here, specifically the findings reported in questions #3 and #4, to build a new combined “practitioner” Ph.D. program that is stronger, more well-integrated, more connected to the community, more focused on social justice, and more relevant to local teachers than our prior programs.

For that reason, we are holding off on developing new learning outcomes and a new and improved assessment plan for the Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction. We know we need both, but we are committed to using our time well and being intentional in the program reinvention process.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any assessment tools and/or revised/updated assessment plans along with this report.