



The Graduate and Professional Student Senate

Program Review of the Department of Comparative Literature

Winter 2013

The Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) conducts program reviews of academic departments that coincide with the Graduate School's Program Review process. GPSS reviews are a vital component of the final Graduate School Program Report. The data collected and presented by the GPSS serves as a primary source of graduate and/or professional student feedback in the Graduate School's Program Review process.

For more information about the GPSS Program Review process or questions regarding this report, please contact gpssex@uw.edu.

Review Scope and Purpose

This review contains a summary of graduate student opinions and feelings regarding their department. It does not seek to give a general overview of the academic program or the department. The report and Catalyst survey were prepared by GPSS Special Assistant Leo Baunach and GPSS Comparative Literature Senator Will Arighi. For more general information regarding the academic program, faculty, courses, and research, please see the Comparative Literature Department Self-Study.

GPSS sponsored a Catalyst Survey for graduate students in Comparative Literature between January 8th and 29th, 2013. 15 of 46 students in the program, 32%, completed the survey. Of the respondents, four were pursuing their Master's, seven were doctoral candidates, three were doctoral students and one was currently a lecturer. Most questions used a five-point scale of 'Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor,' or 'Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree Strongly Disagree.'

The purpose of this survey was to ensure the voice and opinion of the students within this program was included in the review process and thereby taken into account during the planning of the future direction of the program. A complete compilation of the data is presented in the appendix. The original survey data is available from the GPSS upon request. Additionally, a focus group of graduate students in the program was held to discuss the student experience in Comparative Literature. Comments and conclusions from this process are included in this report.

Executive Summary

The academic quality of the program was held in extremely high regard, though some issues arose in regard to departmental community and academic life outside of the classroom. Students greatly valued Comparative Literature's unique focus and the high intellectual quality of faculty. There is a need for greater guidance on finding a faculty advisor. More opportunities for community building within the graduate cohort and with faculty would improve the sharing and quality of research. Language requirements were seen as appropriate but needing clarification and standardization. Funding is sufficient and not a concern among most students.

I. Academic Program

86% of students found the academic standards of Comparative Literature to be 'very good' or 'excellent.' Similarly, there was overwhelming approval of the intellectual quality of the faculty, which 60% termed excellent. Faculty were an important draw in attracting students to the program. One student praised the "high quality courses, professors' interests in my academic achievement, and their constant support outside class." 86% of students rated the intellectual quality of their fellow graduate students as very good or excellent, though a greater portion of this total was in the 'very good' category than for faculty.

Responses were slightly more tepid on the integration of current developments in the field of comparative literature and its sub-disciplines, which almost half of students indicated was 'good.' 53% found it to be very good or excellent.

72% of respondents found program space and facilities to be only good or fair. In the General Assessment section, 45% listed facilities, space and technology as an obstacle, but most (30%) only found it to be a minor obstacle.

67% percent of students deemed current language requirements to be 'appropriate' and approved of the department's focus on multilingual proficiency. However, there was concern about a lack of standardization in how language "proficiency" and "comprehension" is judged. This included the absence of common definitions of the terms and a variance in the requirements for fulfillment across different languages. Some students found that the requirement to finish their language requirements before general examinations created an artificial barrier to their academic success. There was mixed opinion about changing the timeline, but general agreement that the current requirements should be kept in place.

One student commented that "The quality of courses offered and faculty is excellent. I just wish there was more guidance, or more requirements regarding which courses to take. The biggest plus of our department as I see it is complete openness, but that's also its biggest downside. I wish someone had counseled me on what courses I should take -- or cared. I regret my helter-skelter approach to choosing classes and as a consequence do not feel that I have the necessary breadth of knowledge."

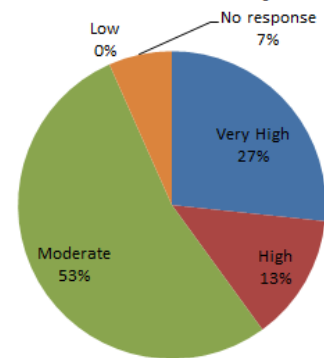
II. Research Experience

Opinions of the research experience in Comparative Literature mirrored the previous comment. Many were extremely happy with their professors and dissertations committees, which they found to be responsive and intellectually beneficial. A student concluded that “I have always benefitted from my professor's advice and intellectual generosity.”

However, many experienced difficulties in finding a committee and making initial connections with professors. Comments included the suggestion that “It would have been helpful to have been paired with an advisor in Comparative Literature. I never quite felt oriented or welcome in this department.” Comparative Literature doctoral students and candidates expressed that once they had found an advisor or mentor, they were greatly pleased with the amount of communication and guidance, even among professors that travelled frequently. In the advising section, 58% (of those to which the question applied) said that they had received adequate advice on selecting a thesis or dissertation advisor.

53% rated the amount of training they received before beginning their research as ‘moderate,’ and 39% found it to be ‘very high’ or ‘high.’ In formulating a research topic, 27% found the level of faculty guidance and collaboration to be excellent and 13% found it to be very good. There were similar responses about guidance while conducting research. In formulating a research topic, 33% found guidance to be good and 13% deemed it fair. For conducting research, 20% found guidance to be good and the number who found it to be ‘fair’ increased to 26%.

Level of training received before beginning research or scholarly work

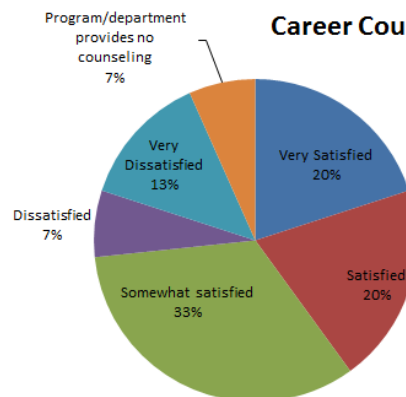


An impressive 87% had attended a professional conference, and 60% (or 69% of those that had attended a conference) had presented a paper.

III. Career Counseling / Job Search

40% were very satisfied or satisfied with career counseling from faculty or advisors in the Department, and 33% were somewhat satisfied. For employment opportunities within academia, 39% found advice to be excellent or very good, and 40% found it to be good. On employment outside academia, results among the very good, good and fair categories were evenly split at 26% each. None deemed this advice excellent. In searching for a job, 33% found the advice very good, 20% good and 33% fair. Results were skewed slightly higher for guidance on preparing a resume or curriculum vitae and how to prepare for an interview. It should be noted that students in the survey and focus group noted that

Career Counseling Satisfaction

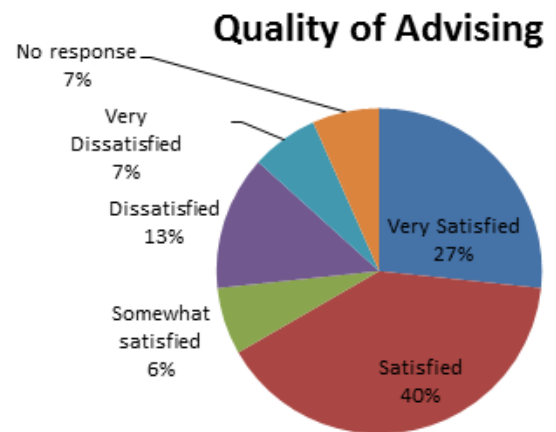


much of their career guidance had come from outside the Department. In particular, the English Department was noted for its career advising workshops. For those that did receive advice from their mentees, committees or other departments, they found it to be useful. The Comparative Literature email list notifying students of open positions was considered valuable.

On career counseling and advising, a student commented “All my committee members offered me suggestions while writing my thesis and more importantly they all have been in touch with me ever since.”

IV. Advising

Some 72% were satisfied with the quality of advising in Comparative Literature and the amount of communication they had with their advisor. A majority had received adequate advice at the various stages of degree completion, but significant numbers indicated that they had not for oral examinations (44% of those to which the question was applicable). Of those to which the question applied, 77% had received adequate advice on written examinations, 66% on developing a thesis or dissertation proposal, 64% on conducting research, and 63% on preparing a final thesis or dissertation draft. Only 2 of 5 respondents had received adequate advice on preparing for their final defense.



Students felt that information on most topics is available and usually communicated at least once. However, they felt that information should be communicated in a more iterated manner. Structured planning to ensure that activities like certificates can be completed on-time is one method through which this may be addressed. In-person advising was greatly valued and commended by students, who hoped that it would be supplemented but not replaced by further online resources.

V. Departmental community

56% agreed that the program fostered a sense of intellectual community, and 39% believed that Comparative Literature encouraged collaboration and teamwork. Often, interdisciplinary work and research sharing occurred through the Simpson Center for the Humanities or other settings outside Comparative Literature.

In terms of overall community, beyond the intellectual level, 40% felt that the sense of community in the Department was excellent or very good, 13% found it to be good and 46% found it fair. There was concern about siloing between the sub-disciplines and an overall lack of contact between graduate students. Suggestions included holding a yearly or quarterly gathering of faculty and students, as has been done occasionally in past years. Students believed this would also facilitate better and earlier connections between students and professors. Some felt that an introductory class, potentially on theory, for those entering the PhD program could also provide a venue for relationship-building between students. An expanded PhD practicum or another venue

for sharing and discussing research among student and faculty was also proposed. Students felt that relationship-building early on would create greater teamwork and collaboration within Comparative Literature.

While there was disagreement over adding to the curriculum burden, consensus emerged that stronger relationships could be built between and within the sub-disciplines, and between graduate students and faculty. Students believed that the drop-out rate among their cohorts could be partly attributed to the lack of community and contact.

Students found that departmental openness to diversity was extremely high, and that commitment to attracting diverse students was also excellent. In both categories, 'excellent' and 'very good' exceeded 70%.

VI. Funding

Overall, debt was not a major concern among Comparative Literature students, and 46% expected to complete their degree with no debt. 27% found financial and work commitments to be a 'major' obstacle.

Students expressed an interest in a clearer and more centralized process of receiving funding. They agreed that the departmental policy of providing funding for up to five years was clearly communicated, but had hoped for more information on funding possibilities at the time of acceptance. Some students noted that they had not received timely notifications or updates of their funding status. One student called the process of awarding Teaching Assistantships "murky." 60% indicated that the criteria for financial support were sometimes but not always available.

VII. General

54% expected to finish their degree in five years or less. 27% would recommend the program to students in their field, and 73% would 'probably' or 'maybe' do so. Most did not identify major obstacles to their academic work and research. Family obligations were a major obstacle for 27% of the students. All student-parents felt supported. A student noted that the Department was extremely helpful and skilled in guiding them through the immigration visa process.

Four students had also considered going to UC Berkeley, and two each applied to the University of Michigan, University of Iowa and New York University.