

Report of Site Visit Sonoma State University French program
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Introduction

This is an evaluative report listing the findings of the reviewer on his virtual site visit of the French program at Sonoma State University on October 15- 16, 2020. The reviewer was provided with a self-study compiled by the department, the previous site visit review report by Dr. Patricia Black, background material including online university resources, and was sent cover letters outlining the organization of the self-study. The visit consisted of an initial briefing by Dr. Hollis Robbins, Dean of Arts and Humanities, a meeting with full-time faculty members Drs. Suzanne Toczyski and Christine Renaudin, an interview with French Program Alumni, and an interview of current undergraduate students in FR 321 France Today. This was followed on the second day by a meeting with Dr. Jeffrey Reeder, Chair, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, a meeting with Dr. Olivier Marteau, adjunct faculty member in French, with a wrap-up meeting with Dr. Stacey Bosick, Interim Associate Vice President for Academic Programs.

Interactions with faculty and students were supplemented with written follow-up in the form of course materials, course proposals, and student testimonials from both current students and alumni regarding program learning outcomes and goals. Evidence and data reveal that the French program at SSU continues to be a strong and innovative humanities program. Despite the inherent difficulties of a virtual site visit, interactions with shareholders at all levels, from current undergraduates to alumni and from instructors and administrators provided a wealth of data and experiences which give substance to this review.

Curriculum coherence and currency

Overall, the French B.A. degree at SSU offers a carefully structured yet flexible curriculum in language literature and culture. From the perspective of the College Dean, it offers a diverse and flexible humanities program founded on critical thinking with both global and U.S.-focused content and applications. The program, besides serving its majors and minors as well as the other majors in MLL via a second language requirement, has had remarkable success in doubling as a service program in GE (both lower- and upper-division). At the same time as the program serves students seeking GE credit, it harnesses their interest into generating new majors as internal transfers and double majors. In particular, the program's GE learning community for first-year students provides an early gateway into languages and cultures for those who might otherwise lose the desire to explore this area as they start on their own major trajectories.

All French courses (with one exception) are GE area C3 (four lower-division and seven upper-division). The exception, FR 314 (C2), has also served as a Writing Intensive Course. All lower-

division GE courses have, as of this writing, been resubmitted for recertification in the new GE pattern going forward and emphasize from very beginning (FR 101) the diversity of the French-speaking world (including the experiences of French-speakers in Louisiana and Haitian-Americans, for example). The incorporation of GE courses at all levels of the French curriculum has a significant benefit in the area of increased diversity and inclusivity and responds to specific assessment data (see below). Through the program's heavy investment in GE, students from all majors are drawn to explore languages and cultures (even beyond French), and the faculty are further motivated to diversify their offerings in response to their wider audience. This has happened in particular in the case of the literature and culture course FR 314 (taught in English for the broadest audience possible), whose subtopics include Caribbean and U.S. French-speaking cultures.

Recommendation: continue proposing upper-division GE courses in the area of francophone studies, with an option to teach them in either English or French, as enrollment allows.

Curriculum vs. time to degree

Not only does the flexibility of French program accommodate students early as well as later in the course of their studies, but the curriculum map is designed to allow students to finish in fewer semesters than many comparable majors (English with a Literature Concentration, for example) because of the relatively low number of units required to complete the major beyond the beginning and intermediate levels. The encouragement to study abroad further gives French majors an advantage in reducing their time to degree because a significant number of courses can be completed in a more concentrated manner as opposed to the one or two per semester at their home campus.

In addition, this relatively short time to degree has two significant benefits related to graduation yield. First, students are less likely to change majors once they see that they are well on their way towards completion of the degree and second, it allows for students to add a second major or another degree program such as a professional certificate or minor to complement their humanities major. That the program has a healthy mix of entering first-year students and internal transfers and double majors is a remarkable feat given that the main reason students do not major in languages or switch out early on is the perception that they do not have enough proficiency at the beginning of their studies to undertake a four-year program. Conversely, the main reason proficient students do not add a language major or change into a language major is the perception that they will not have enough time to finish. Both issues are resolved in a pedagogically beneficial manner by the well-structured and flexible French major curriculum. The main challenge that language programs have throughout the CSU is attracting first-year students as majors. The French program's intensive advising activities and its GE community have gone a long way towards remedying this problem by harnessing interest as students enter SSU.

The major curriculum, as it is based on the cultivation of critical thinking and cultural competency in the area of French and Francophone cultures, is current in relation to content and to teaching methodologies. Course syllabi demonstrate the inclusion of diversity-related issues from the French-speaking world and integrate authentic web-based materials at all levels, providing students the opportunities to research and critically evaluate content from all sources. Language and culture programs, such as the French major, are ideally placed to give students and faculty opportunities to integrate materials "in real time" as they are created by the target cultures into their overall learning environment. In doing so, students learn to speak and navigate in an authentic cultural context and have the opportunity to participate in virtual exchanges with students and faculty from abroad.

In relation of the appropriateness of the total number of units, the French major is well within CSU norms. If one counts the core requirements from the second semester of the second year (FR 202), the French major has a total of 32 required units, 28 of which are upper division. This is slightly fewer than the SSU Spanish major but is consistent with other representative CSU French programs (Chico 31 units (27 of which are UD) and San Bernardino (minimum of 36 units, 28 of which are UD)). The apparent disparities between total unit counts in language majors across the CSU are due to the degree to which lower-division units are incorporated into the actual required unit count. As in most programs, students at SSU may start at the upper-division level with demonstrated proficiency, further reducing their time to degree.

Recommendation: because of the recent increase in the creation of virtual exchanges at all levels of language and culture teaching, the French program is encouraged to pursue this area to supplement its Fulbright Teaching Assistant program as well as its traditional exchanges, such as the one through CSU International Programs.

Relevance and clarity of learning objectives and integration with the curriculum

The attainment by students of the Program Learning Outcomes in the French program is clearly projected across the four-years beginning with FR 101 and culminating with FR 475. Not only do they follow a logical progression based on proficiency, which is universal in language and culture programs, but the program distinguishes itself from other language programs, including that at Cal Poly, by clearly delineating skill- and knowledge-based outcomes as parallel to critical thinking based meta-level outcomes. For example, knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of French (PLO 7), that is to say an ability to proficiently navigate spoken and written French, is differentiated from an "appreciation and knowledge of grammar and linguistic concepts" (PLO 12). Students throughout their time in the program are asked to actively reflect on the meaning and intentionality of the learning process itself as they acquire linguistic and cultural fluency.

The number of PLOs might in a cursory review seem excessive (19), especially when faculty are confronted with the requirement to assess PLOs over multi-year cycles, however, if we consider that they are paired and stepped up in this way, knowledge vs. meta-knowledge, we see that

they form a coherence system that is clearly demonstrated by the Courses/PLO alignment document. The capstone PLO 19 as it addresses lifelong learning and the applicability of the French degree to situations outside the university, has particular resonance with the alumni interviewed (see below). In addition, the Program Learning Outcomes are logically and coherently grouped according to those specific to French (PLOs 1-7), those related to General Education objectives (PLOs 8-15), and those which expand students' horizons in the areas of values, diversity, and ethical issues (PLOs 16-19).

Recommendation: I confirm the assessment of the previous reviewer that the PLOs should be maintained as they are because they clearly and logically reflect the actual student learning process and provide students with specific guideposts as they progress through the program.

Evidence of fulfillment of learning outcomes and use of assessment for program improvement

The French program has a comprehensive assessment cycle that includes various types of meaningful assessment at all levels. As noted in the previous reviewer's report, the faculty take their assessment extremely seriously and apply their findings in concrete ways to improve and innovate the French curriculum. As mentioned above, the number of Program Learning Outcomes is not in itself an impediment to assessment. On the contrary, their specificity allows the program to isolate and fine-tune important sub-areas of linguistic proficiency and cultural competency in relation to different department- and university-level goals. The PLOs further raise the bar for the students by assessing the way in which they perceive their own place in the program's learning process, especially via the capstone written and oral autobiographical project and via the exit survey both done in FR 475 Senior Seminar. This meta-analysis provides precious data to which the students themselves are very sensitive, as witnessed in the alumni interviews. One aspect of what students take away from the program upon graduation is the ability to do a "close reading" of a text or other cultural artifact, so it is fitting that the detailed nature of the program assessment affords the faculty, the students, and outside reviewers a way to do a "close reading" of the attainment of the various Program Learning Outcomes and of the overall Program Goals.

Listed under Direct Assessment, the Self Study (pages 22-24) emphasizes oral proficiency, but this is in no way solely "skills" based. This should rather be understood as not only proficiency in listening and speaking, but as a type of continuous comprehensive "capstone" assessment done before the student progresses to the next level. Indeed, this assessment repeated at regular intervals synthesizes data on oral and written proficiency skills at each level and allows a full demonstration of communicative abilities in an appropriate cultural context. The one thing that all the current students and the alumni agree on is the profound academic and personal significance of these narrative oral presentations and peer and self-evaluations which they accomplished at the end of each course, seeing it more as a rite of passage. Several of the alumni affirmed how the self-confidence they gained through that assessment exercise continues to affect their professional and personal interactions to this day.

This continuous assessment culminates in a logical and seamless fashion in the capstone oral and written autobiographical project in FR 475, where senior-level students reflect on their major and on their own personal and intellectual investment in the learning process. Regarding this project, the previous reviewer deemed it "a superior instrument for the major as a whole." Indeed, it assesses every single one of the Program Learning Outcomes at an advanced level-- oral proficiency, writing proficiency, critical thinking, understanding cultural and historical achievements, navigating cultural differences and gaining an increased awareness of diversity, and the ability to apply the knowledge and skills acquired thorough their major to situations outside the academic setting, including to an analysis of themselves. I confirm by my observations and interactions with the faculty and the students my predecessor's conclusion that "this capstone assessment pertinent to every aspect of the French program represents a model of the genre." I further confirm that it is the most comprehensive and meaningful assessment plan that I have seen in my more than 20 years at the CSU.

It is clear that the faculty follow their assessment through to the final stages by closing the loop, effecting curricular and programmatic changes and innovations. They do this, in particular, via the creation of new subtopics in diverse Francophone cultures at both lower-division and upper-division levels and via the department's participation in a new Fulbright teaching assistant exchange, which brings students from France every other year in order to give the program a deeper sense of connection with the target language and cultures, this as a response to exit survey data suggesting that students felt that they needed to increase their appreciation of diversity and difference and also that they needed to improve their oral and written communication.

Besides specific classroom and PLO assessment at the different levels of the program, faculty in the French program are able to assess their program goals as a whole in relation to broader university needs and learning objectives, including diversity and inclusion goals. Because both full-time faculty members in French have been heavily invested in GE and curriculum governance and university-level academic advising as well as in the Global Studies Steering Committee and the CSU-wide World Languages Council, this system- and university-level engagement and expertise is brought to bear on the French program--especially in the area of GE development and content renewal of the curriculum at all levels. The French faculty are role models across the university in the way they translate their service portfolios into tangible gains in the department's programs. In particular, the new Global Awareness GE Overlay will certainly increase the visibility of languages and cultures across the university and have a positive effect on enrollment and program development in French which will further solidify its place at the center of the humanities at SSU. Further confirmation of the profile of the French program's service across the university can be seen in how students in the program have emulated their mentors by creating for service-learning projects with local high school classes. This continuous evaluative engagement at all levels is the most convincing evidence for the success of the overall assessment program in French.

Recommendation: continue to gather data and student feedback via the assessment program as it stands.

Sufficiency of resources vs. the quality of the learning experience

As a traditional humanities program based on direct and sustained faculty-student interaction, the SSU French program is remarkable in that it has accomplished and continues to accomplish its program goals with the two full-time French faculty sharing only a 1.5 position in French (Dr. Olivier Marteau having taken on a significant role in delivering the curriculum since Dr. Renaudin has stepped into various administrative roles at the college level). All three of these faculty members have complementary specializations and teaching methodologies and are thereby able to deliver the different components of the program efficiently and effectively.

Other programs, with more full-time faculty teaching 100% French assignments, have not seen their programs become models at the CSU level, as SSU's French program has surely done. The faculty and administrators at SSU see their program as having sufficient personnel and other logistical support to continue their program as it stands now. However, in order to maintain the momentum and quality of the program, it is recommended that a new tenure-track in French search be implemented as soon as it is feasible, since one of the two tenured faculty members is currently participating in the faculty early retirement program.

Recommendation: Consistent with the desire of the college dean to see French establish stronger interdisciplinary links with other programs, a joint hire with another program, such as American Multicultural Studies would be extremely desirable. As further synergies develop with a broader faculty and student body, enrollment in French courses and in the French major will inevitably increase.

The SSU French major as a student-centered experience

Interviews with faculty, current students and alumni, and an evaluation of the structure and content of the major curriculum, demonstrate that the French program at SSU generates an extremely high level of student engagement and satisfaction. Rare are the language and culture programs across the CSU who can match SSU's French program's student focus. First, the direct connection between faculty and students and between students is a direct consequence of its three principal faculty members (two full-time and one part-time). Time and time again through the student interview process, the individual role each instructor played in motivating and leading by example was emphasized. Even years after graduation, many alumni still felt the impact of the French faculty's unique pedagogical approaches, perceived as "French style" having strict structure and deep faculty engagement at all levels. They brought up tangible results still pertinent in their personal and professional lives, mainly in critical thinking, speaking and writing skills in French but also, significantly, in English and other languages pursued after graduation.

Student feedback in both interviews (alumni and current students) highlights how learning a second or third language helps prepare them to be more globally oriented, empathetic, and open-minded, and that the French department at Sonoma State in particular fosters this kind of development. Students single out the capstone senior seminar as being focused on Franco-American culture and literature, which inspired at least one student to research and work with literature from Louisiana during her master's program, something which students found as unique to SSU and lacking in many French programs. They found it encouraging that Dr. Toczyski's Caribbean Literature class will continue exploring more diverse content from the wider Francophone world and that in a broader GE context. Students mention finding "extremely rewarding" courses with a non-Eurocentric focus because they provide the opportunity for French programs to expand exponentially, be more inclusive, and be more cohesive with the direction of postmodern and postcolonial language and literature studies/criticism. In other words, they felt that the inclusion of these courses and the prospect that there will be more in the near future will keep the program itself current as students see the field of French as relevant and innovative. They also mention potential collaborations with other departments, namely sociology and ethnic studies. In this the students echo the comments of the Dean Robbins who sees the French program as a locus for innovation and experimentation especially in the area of French-speaking U.S. experiences and histories (Haitian Americans, Caribbean Americans, Louisiana, New England, etc.).

Several alumni interviewed had specific praise for what the program offers in terms of training in formal writing. One student observed that the quality of undergraduate writing in another humanities program at SSU was not quite what she had expected in contrast to the French program's multi-year emphasis on writing and critical thinking with specific outcomes in form and content. She singled out the work of Dr. Toczyski in particular, in helping students sharpen their writing skills, which still today has a significant impact on her students' ability to express themselves in the professional world. Going further, the alumni reflected in our discussion on the careful blending in the SSU French program of an orientation towards concise and formulaic academic expression, as in traditional French education, with a more U.S.-based emphasis on creative expression. They saw that while the French department prepared them very well for going abroad in terms of oral expression and comprehension, there might be grounds for suggesting further focus on the formulaic French style in the writing classes (such as the difference between a *dissertation*, a *résumé*, and a *commentaire*, etc.). Such a focus, in their view, has the potential to draw attention to what they consider to be a crucial skill as they pursue higher education, one which the U.S. university system generally does not, in general, seem to emphasize as greatly.

All in all, alumni found that the French program at Sonoma State has nurtured them to be continuing students and language learners, as well as global citizens, and they find this to be true more and more as time goes on. I wish to quote one student here to conclude because of the forceful and frank way this is expressed: "Suzanne and Christine above all do a very good job of creating a welcoming and quality-oriented environment. They are encouraging, but also tough with their students because they expect quality work and know they have nurtured their

students to deliver it. This is not a characteristic I noticed in many other departments at Sonoma State, but which reflects the high standards one will encounter as they go out into the world, whether to work professionally, or to pursue rigorous degree programs at the masters and PhD level. So above all, I would like to say that their 'tough' expectations and subsequent support to meet those expectations proved to be a very successful formula for my own experience at the Sonoma State French department." From this testimony, it is clear that the French program has been shaped from the student perspective and that it stands out among its peer programs in its understanding of students' needs, challenges, and characteristics and ability to effectively serve its students through their years at SSU and beyond.

Conclusions

The overall takeaway from my conversations with the current students and alumni is that the French program should be maintained as it is, with the areas of Francophone studies given further prominence (Africa, the Caribbean, French-speaking regions in the U.S, Oceania, East Asia). All stakeholders recognize service to the wider university as a significant contribution of the French program, not only in the form of the Wine Business Certificate, but also its outreach to diverse student populations in its GE courses, its participation in the Global Awareness overlay, and as a vital stepping-stone for students studying and interning abroad. The French program, as it has the potential to include an extremely diverse world population in its curriculum, has the ability to partner with many programs across the university, contacts which will further strengthen it both qualitatively and quantitatively. Rather than invest its efforts in new certificate programs, for example, the conclusion of this reviewer as well as of those students, faculty, and administrators consulted is that the French program should continue to be a vital humanities program founded on critical inquiry and the exploration of diversity.

Overall recommendation: Continuation without reservation