

Interdisciplinary Studies Special Major in German Cultural Studies

External Reviewer Report (Spring 2021)

Reviewer

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Introduction

This report is based on:

- the ITDS Special Major: German Cultural Studies self-study and supplemental materials
- a two-day virtual site visit
- a review of public-facing information on the Sonoma State website

During my virtual site visit, I met via Zoom with various stakeholders of the program: the program coordinator, Dr. Michaela Grobbel; Chair of the Department of Modern Languages & Literatures, Dr. Jeffrey Reeder; the faculty of the Department of MLL; Dean of the School of Arts & Humanities, Dr. Hollis Robbins; Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies, Dr. Stacy Bosick; former Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies and current interim Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Karen Moranski; twenty-two faculty and department chairs from across the university whose courses are requirements or electives in the major; twelve current students and alumni of the program; over a dozen former Fulbright and SITE teaching assistants; and members of the larger German-speaking community in the north Bay region. A small number of stakeholders unable to participate in meetings also provided feedback via e-mail.

This report is organized in five sections in which the reviewer contextualizes the program within larger trends in the discipline and then outlines commendations, challenges, and recommendations for the ITDS Special Major in German Cultural Studies, and ends with some concluding thoughts about the future of the program.

Disciplinary context

When the major in German Cultural Studies at Sonoma State was established as an interdisciplinary special major in 2014, it followed a trend in postsecondary German education and foreign language education generally. Especially since the 1990s, the interest in cultural studies, multiculturalism, and a professions-oriented curriculum have influenced foreign language programs across North America. German programs in particular have increasingly departed from the canonical philological and literature-based curriculum and have embraced interdisciplinarity. While emphasizing language proficiency as an essential component of a major, German programs have also progressively incorporated courses taught

in English. In the 1990s, the German Studies Association developed [curricular guidelines](#) to guide programs in making the shift from the traditional canonical “great thinkers” approach toward an interdisciplinary “German Studies” curriculum orientation. SSU’s BA program in German Cultural Studies follows the trendlines of a more holistic German Studies approach to the discipline.

Commendations

The major incorporates several of the best practice curricular recommendations by the German Studies Association, including:

- A strong focus on language proficiency.

This is affirmed not only through coursework taken at Sonoma State and abroad, but through students’ attainment of the internationally recognized Goethe Institute B1 Language Certificate. Passing the level B1 proficiency exam is a requirement for all German Cultural Studies majors and minors at SSU and provides external validation of graduates’ language ability. Such a requirement is unusual in German programs in North America and it is a testament to the quality of instruction in the program at SSU.

- An interdisciplinary curriculum, including core courses on European history.

Required core courses for the major include the study of European history, politics, and art. For the 23-24 additional units of electives, students can choose from courses in thirteen different disciplines across three different Schools. Interdisciplinary courses are taught in English, allowing for scope and depth of investigation beyond students’ level of German proficiency.

- A senior project.

This rigorous culminating experience in the major invites students to connect their knowledge and experience in German with other disciplines. The public presentation of their work requires them to explain and defend their research to a broader audience and provides additional validation of their work.

- A semester or more of academic study or internship experience in a German-speaking country.

While not required, study abroad is strongly encouraged and supported. The result is that nearly all majors graduate having engaged in a longer-term immersion experience in a German-speaking country.

While SSU’s German Cultural Studies program thus sits neatly along a trajectory that is recognizable to those in the profession, the manifestations of its adherence to disciplinary recommendations distinguish it as especially innovative and effective. While giving students a basic familiarity with German history and traditions, the program is forward-looking, familiarizes students with current problems and issues, and prepares graduates for life as global citizens.

- The 2015 book *Taking Stock of German Studies in the United States: The New Millennium* suggests re-envisioning German Studies as transnational inquiry into the relationship and interaction of German-speaking cultures beyond national borders. The SSU German Cultural Studies curriculum encourages students to do exactly that. In addition to the interdisciplinary major core, which develops students' proficiency in German and places their learning about German culture in a firm historical, political, and artistic context, the 23-24 units of elective options to complete the major requirements are far-ranging; it includes courses in anthropology, business, economics, English, history, communications, music, philosophy, sociology, and theater. As evidenced in the themes of students' senior projects, this model breaks down the traditional "silo-ing" of disciplines, stimulates intellectual exploration and encourages students to synthesize knowledge and to identify connections between disparate themes, and empowers them to take ownership of their own learning.
- In addition to the study abroad experience, students are required to engage in an internship. Some do this while abroad. Most participate in internships in the region, e.g., for the German Language School of the North Bay. This has both been a result of and has reinforced community relationships, has provided students with critical real-world experience prior to graduation, and has also led directly to careers for some graduates.
- While ensuring meaningful student experiences in work settings and abroad, the program also has a well-established extracurricular cultural agenda that provide co-curricular opportunities for students and serves the larger campus community. These include a weekly conversation hour, a bi-weekly film series, regular invited speakers from the greater region and from abroad, field trips to career and cultural events in the region, and numerous social opportunities. This contributes to the strong peer relationships and a sense of community and camaraderie among program participants.

The program also takes full advantage of the proximity of Sonoma to German-speaking populations and institutions in the greater San Francisco Bay region. The program has developed close cooperative relationships with the Goethe Institute, the German consulate, and German-American schools in the north Bay Area, among others.

- While language programs are traditionally and typically strongly vertical, i.e., learners must take a series of 4 to 6 sequential courses that advance in proficiency incrementally before students can participate in upper level courses in the target language, SSU's German curriculum has built in flexibility in that sequencing, breaking down one of the traditional barriers to attaining a degree in languages. This and the variety of General Education overlays a student can accomplish through the interdisciplinary major make a double major more feasible while simultaneously facilitating timely progress to degree.
- The program solidly prepares students for productive and interesting careers and opportunities for further education. Alumni are pursuing careers in sales, education, the travel industry, financial services, real estate, and communications and many are engaged in graduate study in diverse fields in the US or abroad. The several alumni with whom I spoke emphasized and

explained in detail how well their experiences in the German major prepared them for life and work outside of the university regardless of whether their chosen area of employment was explicitly tied to German. Graduates had overwhelmingly positive experiences in the program and cited the major as an important venue for exploring new interests and discovering their passions. They are rightfully proud of their work and accomplishments in the major, and described their experiences in the major as “meaningful,” “essential,” and “life-changing.”

- The program enjoys widespread support from colleagues in disciplines from across campus. Several experience the participation of German Cultural Studies students in their courses as a welcome enrichment in courses typically inhabited by majors. The German students bring a level of intellectual curiosity and inquiry that they claim is otherwise largely absent.
- The research agenda of the core faculty person, Dr. Michaela Grobbel, addresses social justice and equity issues in the German-speaking world and these topics are fully integrated in the courses she teaches.
- All evidence demonstrates that the program directly serves the [stated mission of Sonoma State](#) by preparing students who: have a foundation for lifelong learning, have a broad cultural perspective, have a keen appreciation of intellectual and aesthetic achievements, will be active citizens and leaders in society, are capable of pursuing fulfilling careers in a changing world, and are concerned with contributing to the health and well-being of the world at large.
- All evidence further demonstrates that the program is strongly oriented toward serving Sonoma State’s [strategic priorities](#): It fosters student success, is innovative and promotes academic excellence, cultivates leadership qualities in its students, and has a transformative impact on the students and the surrounding community.

Challenges

- The program’s status as a special major in Interdisciplinary Studies (ITDS) is an impediment to its growth and success. The program straddles two Schools with the major administrated in ITDS and the minor housed in the School of the Arts & Humanities. Among other things, this administrative structure creates an unclear hierarchy of leadership, sets it apart visually and factually from other majors at SSU, inhibits accurate data collection, and causes inefficient use of time and resources. Administratively, German Cultural Studies is regarded as a concentration in Interdisciplinary Studies and thus does not enjoy the same financial and institutional support that a regular major does. Furthermore, the program’s status as a “special major” instead of a recognized major housed in a School makes students feel that their work is devalued and not recognized as equal to other majors on campus.

Its current status, which was never meant to be permanent, is an obstacle to the administration, funding, acceptance, promotion, and ultimately, the growth and success of the major.

- Based on discussions with administrators, SSU does not have a well-established infrastructure for supporting interdisciplinary programs. I see this as a major reason that there is both perceived and real resistance to support for the German Cultural Studies major. The university infrastructure seems to offer few incentives for programs that reach across Schools. On the contrary, budget models seem to favor the promotion of enrollment within Schools rather than beyond them. Dr. Bosick reported that there is a growing desire to normalize interdisciplinary programs, but it is unclear how current models might change to encourage and appropriately fund such programs. This institutional barrier is a hindrance to the success of the German Cultural Studies program, but the solutions lie beyond the scope of the program.
- From an institutional and administrative perspective, measures of program success seem to be largely quantitative and tied to the budget model described above. The reliance on selected quantitative data minimizes the narrative that abundant qualitative data tells in demonstrating this program's effectiveness in meeting SSU's mission and strategic priorities.

One example of this is the relationship between the major and study abroad. While abroad, students can earn up to 30 units toward their BA in German Cultural Studies. On the one hand, this represents a cost savings to the university because it outsources a large portion of instruction in the major. Yet, the role of the program in sending students abroad is neither recognized nor remunerated, a problem not only for German Cultural Studies but for all language programs in the CSU. In fact, language programs are implicitly penalized because the quantitative measures for judging program success do not take these cost savings into account and instead emphasize smaller numbers of students in campus-based courses, nor do they acknowledge the transformative and life-changing experiences of participants. The German Cultural Studies program nevertheless is delivered with significant cost savings over other majors and contributes significantly to study abroad and internationalization efforts of the campus as a whole.

- The major was developed in 2013/14 using existing resources at Sonoma State and at the time of its inception did not require additional allocation of funding or new hiring. It continues to operate with the same and in some cases fewer resources, despite myriad new responsibilities the major requires, e.g., major and study abroad advising, supervising senior projects, internship placement and supervision, administering the B1 proficiency exam, developing new courses. The lion's share of work in coordinating, maintaining, and directing the program, and delivering instruction in it, have fallen upon a single faculty member, Dr. Michaela Grobbel, who performs much uncompensated work to keep the program afloat. This was a common theme across *all* of the constituencies with whom I spoke.

Compounding this is the fact that Dr. Grobbel's teaching assignment sometimes includes General Education courses outside of the German program. These are sometimes cross-listed with German courses, but not always. And when they are cross-listed, the German students inevitably receive less instruction in the target language.

In short, this major is operating with less than one full-time faculty person assigned to it and is

only functioning due to her ongoing uncompensated work overloads. The status quo is both inequitable and unsustainable.

- Lack of consistency in course offerings has disrupted students' ability to pursue the major. Cancellation of seeder courses in the basic language sequence makes it impossible for students to progress through the major and impacts all future courses in the language sequence in future semesters. Such cancellations are also demoralizing and demotivating and cause students to seek out more stable options. There is a spiral effect whereby low enrollments lead to cancellations which results in fewer majors which also cause lower enrollments. Such cancellations also interfere with program promotion and recruitment, thus further exacerbating the problem.

Recommendations

My recommendations for the future of the German Cultural Studies program fall into three broad categories:

Status

- Move the German Cultural Studies BA from its current location in Interdisciplinary Studies to its more obvious home in the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures in the School of Arts & Humanities, thereby dropping its status as a special major and recognizing it as an equal among foreign language programs and among BA programs at SSU. There is broad-based support for such a move among most stakeholders with whom I interacted. Faculty in MLL specifically expressed unequivocal support for such a move and were confident that the move would not drain resources from the Spanish and French programs. On the contrary, it is more likely that the administrative placement of the major in MLL would bring major-based funding to the department. Given that the German minor already exists in MLL, it is also the most logical home for the German Cultural Studies major.

In addition to administrative benefits, this move would also improve the visibility and perceptions of the program, change how students and staff think and talk about it, remove some of the obstacles preventing students from pursuing it, and simplify and aid recruitment efforts.

- Two possible directions for the program, following its move from ITDS to the School of Arts & Humanities, emerged from discussions with campus stakeholders:
 1. Continue supporting and build upon the successes of the interdisciplinary program in German Cultural Studies as it currently exists.
 2. Phase out the program as it currently exists and create a new major with new courses from departments in the School of Arts & Humanities that could be cross-listed as German courses.

While Option 2 would perhaps help the program better meet some of the quantitative measures of program success, in my estimation, Option 1, which was overwhelmingly favored by most campus stakeholders, is the best chance for the ongoing and future success of the program. Option 1 would maintain the broad interdisciplinary structure that is the foundation of its innovative approach and its success. Current and former program participants deem the interdisciplinary approach of the degree specifically to be essential and found that it opens up myriad opportunities post-graduation. Moreover, in its current structure, the German Cultural Studies program tracks trends in the field of German Studies and it is positioned to be a model of the interdisciplinarity that the campus would like to develop.

Such interdisciplinarity that reaches across Schools also has the potential to draw students who initially identify their interests as lying outside the Arts & Humanities. Connecting the major to other disciplines is an effective way to attract students who have an interest in fields that are seen as strengths of German-speaking cultures, e.g., business, sustainability, engineering, sciences, or in international careers. This pattern is identifiable in the double majors and minor choices of program alumni who, in addition to their German Cultural Studies specialization, pursued majors in Environmental Studies and Planning, Physics, Business Administration, for example. The Engineering Sciences Department chair reported developing partnerships with universities that are part of CSU IP in Germany and noted that the German program helps connect engineering students with these opportunities abroad. Option 1 invites the further development of such cooperative relationships with other departments and Schools.

Though demographic data show that the program is statistically slightly more Caucasian than the SSU campus at large (53% vs. 43%), the program has the potential to attract more URM students through outreach and recruitment efforts. The content of the German Cultural Studies program is more diverse and dynamic than the discipline name suggests.

Changing the current major to embrace a more traditionally oriented Arts & Humanities German curriculum would in my view not serve the student population of SSU as well as the current program does. This would diminish the potential of the German Cultural Studies program to attract students from outside of the Arts & Humanities. Implicit in Option 2 is skepticism about the potential future success of the German Cultural Studies program based on selected quantitative measures; however, it seems to me that the program has not yet existed under institutional conditions that would allow it to flourish, and there is no guarantee that it would enjoy more or even equal success in a thoroughly revised format.

Staffing

- The major cannot and should not be expected to survive on the willingness of a single faculty member to voluntarily take on excess workload. In order to survive and have a chance to thrive and grow, the program needs additional support and personnel that could and should include some combination of the following:
 - Assigned time for supervision of senior projects.
 - Release time for administrative tasks associated with the program, including supervision of any teaching assistants.

- Ongoing institutional support for a Fulbright Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) each year. In the past, the German native speaker FLTAs have provided integral support of extracurricular offerings and community building within the program and have played a significant and active role in helping bring international awareness to the SSU campus. An FLTA is also qualified to teach up to two courses per semester and could take on some teaching responsibilities in the program. A commitment to supporting an FLTA could help provide the necessary programmatic continuity described below and give the program an opportunity to grow.
- An additional tenure-line faculty hire in German with an interdisciplinary focus. This would add flexibility to the German curriculum, increase course sharing opportunities, and allow for sharing of administrative and service tasks associated with the program.
- A regular work assignment for a qualified part-time lecturer. The program has fortunately been able to rely on Dr. Kathleen Foley-Beining to fill in whenever needed, but the lack of consistency in the availability of part-time work could result in a personnel gap in the future. She has not taught a German course at SSU since Fall 2018.
- The outsourcing of some administrative tasks to the extent this is possible, e.g., identify and train a qualified individual to take over study abroad advising, have students complete their senior projects as part of the Global Studies capstone, contract a qualified part-time lecturer to assist with some tasks.
- Thoughtful course sharing collaborations with other German programs in the CSU. These would need to be carefully considered and mutually beneficial to all programs involved and must not undermine the uniqueness of and enrollment in the SSU program.

Stabilized Enrollment

- A commitment to continuity and predictability in the core course offerings each semester is essential to the stability of the program. This would facilitate planning and would demonstrate whether this major can thrive as expected when it has consistent and predictable offerings and adequate institutional support. A functional annual plan of course offerings might therefore look something like this:

Fall Semester:	GER 101 (three sections, one of which could be MLL 161) GER 200 GER 314 GER 315
Spring Semester:	GER 102 GER 210 GER 220 (also offered to other campuses through CSU Fully Online) GER 300 Senior projects

This structure seems realistic and is in fact quite minimalistic considering that these courses constitute the core of a BA program.

As the program grows, ideally at least two sections of GER 101 and one section of GER 102 would be offered both fall and spring, giving students the ability to enter and continue the program in any semester.

- With core courses offered consistently, energies could be devoted to developing cooperative relationships and dual programs with Business, Engineering, Environmental Studies, and Music, among others.

Conclusion

Between the official start of the program in Fall 2014 and Spring 2019, a total of 15 students had graduated with a BA in German Cultural Studies. Considering that most students who complete the major begin in GERM 101 at SSU, 2018 would have been the first year that a student entering the program as a first-time freshman in 2014 could have graduated. AY 2018/19 saw the largest number of graduates (six), which represented a doubling of the numbers in any previous year. Thirteen students were enrolled in the special major as of Fall 2020. This growth trajectory would have the best chance of continuing if some of the barriers to program growth and support that are described in this report were addressed.

The German Cultural Studies program distinguishes itself as an effective, high-quality educational model and is successful by many measures even though it has never existed under conditions that would allow it to thrive. As outlined above, there are many options at the disposal of SSU, many of which would require only a modest commitment of resources, to sustain and expand on the program's current successes and make it healthy and functional into the future. A consistent and reliable investment in the program for the next five years would enable a more accurate quantitative assessment of program productivity and its growth potential into the future.