**Modern Languages & Cultures Assessment Update: 2012**

Each fall we collect data from all 301 courses for French, German, and Spanish. During each spring, we apply the same assessment tool to the most advanced senior-level class being taught that semester (FR. 411; GER 306; SPAN 362) in each of the language sections for comparison. The 301 course in each language is in many ways a transition course from lower-division language (more structure-based) to upper division language (more content-based). This is the first upper-division course that our students take. In this course, though grammar is usually still present, there is a shift toward content and theme-based course design. History has indicated that most of our students at the 301 level are in the intermediate range according to the ACTFL Standards. The goal for MLAC is to ensure that all of our graduates are at least at the Advanced-low level, which is the standard used by the State of Michigan with regards to oral proficiency for secondary education teachers.

In an ongoing effort to sharpen our assessment tools, for 2012 we have extrapolated and streamlined a writing assessment tool using ACTFL Standards for writing proficiency, and highlighted the following eight categories:

1. Writing type. They are able to produce appropriate types of writing for basic work and/or academic needs;

2. Major time frames. They demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of mood and aspect (aspect refers to some characteristic of the activity or state of the verb; indicates if an action or state is viewed as completed or in progress, instantaneous or enduring, momentary or habitual);

3. Paragraph structure. They are able to combine and link sentences into texts of paragraph length and structure;

4. Cohesive devices. They demonstrate an ability to incorporate a limited number of cohesive devices, despite redundancy and awkward repetition (cohesive devices are language components that link ideas for seamless flow within and among sentences and paragraphs, such as relative pronouns, pronoun substitutions, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, adverbs of time, and subordinate clauses);

5. Subordination in the expression of ideas. They include subordination in the expression of ideas that is structurally coherent, even if it relies on native patterns of oral discourse or the writing style of the writer’s first language;

6. Sustained control over simple structures. They demonstrate sustained control of simple target language sentence structures;

7. Partial control over complex structures. They demonstrate partial control of more complex sentence structures;

8. Comprehensibility to native-speakers. They produce writing that is understood by natives not used to the writing of non-natives, although some additional effort may be required in the reading of the text.

**OVERALL Writing assessment compared to Advanced-Low criteria**

**DATA:**

**Averages:**

French 301 4.0/8 French 411 6.5/8

German 301 4.5/8 German 306 6.5/8

Spanish 301 5/8 Spanish 362 6.2/8

**Analysis and Interpretation**

As hoped, our comparative survey data shows that students across all 3 languages show improvement in all the categories above in their writing proficiency. It is also clear that the averages for 301 courses in all three languages are lower than the averages for more advanced classes. This might be explained by the fact that in these 301 courses first and second year students tend to be over-represented. Moreover, for our advanced courses including senior seminars, the averages are higher because of the higher enrollment of upper-class students many of whom have studied abroad. The slight discrepancy in proficiency levels among the three different languages, especially at the 301 level, might be attributed to inconsistency in interpretation. While we are professional language instructors we are not adequately trained in official standardized proficiency testing. This training program would require a significant time commitment and is expensive. This issue will be an important part of our MLAC department retreat in August of 2012. With the short time we have at that meeting we will endeavor to gain a more level understanding of the standards and their application. The other option would be to require that all graduates take the oral proficiency exam, which is administered by ADFL. The charge for this exam is also quite expensive. For each individual student it costs approximately $150. Presently those students in MLAC who seek teaching certificates are required to take this exam.

We are satisfied with the results of the data, which shows that our students are making substantial progress in their language proficiency while at Albion College.

**The way forward**

First of all, in future, we will make copies of the writing assessment tool highlighting the eight categories available to our students at the beginning of the semester. In that way, we will be working together (instructor/student) towards attaining most the criteria in each category. Because we feel that it is important to document our student’s progress in other areas, often less easily captured than proficiency in the language (however significant that part is) such as critical and creative thinking (in the target language), understanding cultural and societal norms in the geographical areas they have studied, especially in terms of how they compare to those they grew up with, each spring semester we will continue to ask all our graduating seniors to write a brief reflective essay (written in the target language) in which they describe the range of skills they think they have been able to develop or acquire in their capacity as Modern Language majors or minors at Albion College. We envision this essay being a forum in which students will be able to reflect upon where they are today in comparison to where they were four years ago, both in terms of proficiency as well as the areas described above. This will give us a clearer indication of how majoring or minoring in a Modern Language can radically change or reshape a student’s outlook on life. We will be collecting this information to be included in the 2013 Assessment report.

Additionally, MLAC in conjunction with the Center for International Education (CIE), is continuing to seek ways to collect assessment data about where our students place on the various placement exams they must take at the beginning of their off-campus study. Most, if not all off-campus study programs in countries where English is not the native language, give placement tests to incoming students, in order to see what level of speaking, writing, listening and reading they have already attained in the target language, before they embark on their studies in the program. We expect this data to indicate how our students have progressed since coming to Albion and enrolling in the language courses in our Department. Nevertheless, so far we have been unable to acquire enough data from all the different programs to make a meaningful comparison. We expect to make progress in this area during the coming academic year.

Since our department is several departments in one, each of the language sections has been asked to compare their data between the 301 results and the most advanced-level Spring Semester class. Each section will be asked to identify any trends, discrepancies or qualitative differences in student progression from the intermediate level to the senior level first at the language section level. Those reports will be first given to the chair and then a departmental meeting will be called for discussion of the overall results. An important outcome for us is that each language is similar in terms of student success. Traditionally we have managed the individual language sections as a department and we will continue to do this.