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“Shaping a Master’s Program in Italian Studies”

TLISI 2009 “Changing Curricula: Shaping the Curriculum at the Department or Program Level”, Georgetown University, Tuesday May 19, 2009, 10:45-11:45 am, ICC 116

Our panel’s description mentions “the bigger picture of a student’s journey toward a degree”. Therefore, first of all let me tell you that the “student’s journey towards a degree” that I am about to introduce is still, to borrow a title from Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a long “journey to the end of the night”, for which our students have not departed yet. Indeed, the debut of our Master’s in Italian Studies is scheduled for Fall 2010 but students will hopefully see the light soon thereafter.

And, while talking about journeys, I wish to acknowledge that it is due to the travel plans of Prof. Sara Hager -- the mind, the soul, and the arm of our M.A. -- that I am here today. Prof. Hager would have deserved to get all the credits in person, but she has just landed in Italy for a symposium.

In the context of the current structure of our departmental curriculum, I will highlight three main aspects of the conceptualization of our M.A.:

- Our need for an MA
- The rationale of our MA
- The effects of its implementation on the undergraduate program offerings and management

For the sake of contextualization, I believe it is worthwhile mentioning that as a department we have reflected about our curriculum for many years. About 5 years ago, we began to revise the sequence of upper-level literature course requirements, trying to enhance students’ awareness of periodization in the evolution of Italian literature and

culture by creating a “Gateway to the major” course and also by devising four chronologically-defined and consecutive epochs , making at least one course mandatory in each of the four areas. We then embarked in a more radical and still ongoing curriculum renewal project aimed at integrating language, literature and culture at all course levels (beginning language courses included), and at promoting a verticality of competencies in terms of both contents and methodologies. The writing component is the connector among the different levels, and the study abroad experience is also an integral part of this process. We have devised specific writing skills at each level, and now students keep a portfolio of their writing projects, which we periodically review with them to track their progress and help them with their problems.

In so doing, we think we are complying well with the translingual and transcultural abilities that the Modern Language Association of America has recently recommended as the optimal objective of foreign language and literature departments.

The need for an M.A.

Precisely in light of the systematic approach to students’ competencies that we adopted with the objective of giving students a cogent and innovative 4-year plan, instead of a juxtaposition of self-contained courses, we also began to see better how we could further expand this undergraduate template in order to respond to needs and interests that both students and faculty have demonstrated for a long time—namely, precisely that of reactivating the Master that was suspended in the 80s. Even the evaluators of our 2001 External Review recommended this move, since we are one of the few self-standing

departments of Italian in the US, with approximately 30 majors, 40 minors and 250 students enrolled per semester, and a very strong pool of ordinary faculty.

The students' demands are also evolving: a B.A. is considered increasingly inadequate, and many of our undergraduates have consistently expressed interest in an Italian graduate program at Georgetown. Promising former students now at Yale, Rutgers, Toronto, and Penn, told us explicitly that they would have stayed at Georgetown if we had offered graduate studies opportunities in the field. Therefore, we thought of an M.A. as a tool to retain deserving majors and to recruit more equally committed students from other institutions, and at the same time to attract and retain top faculty, since the option of graduate teaching is very appealing to scholars with an active research agenda.

When I say "we" I am referring to the concerted efforts that all of us ordinary faculty made in terms of input and cooperation, but, I insist, without Prof Hager's unrivalled knowledge of curricular, legal, and financial aspects, we would certainly have failed, especially in a moment of crisis like the current one. I think the success of our proposal, beyond the academic validity that was recognized, was also due precisely to the exhaustive details that the project description provided about many administrative subtleties that otherwise could have slowed down the approval process.

The rationale of our M.A.

The idea we all shared was that of a Master that could consolidate and expand the academic and professional objectives of our B.A., but that could also distinguish us from other graduate opportunities in Italian in the United States. We hence tried to articulate a structure able to offer:

A broad in-depth knowledge of Italian culture
 High proficiency in Italian language
 Opportunities for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary study
 Overseas study and cultural immersion
 Professional options

The Master has been conceived as both a terminal degree for professionally-oriented students and as an intermediate step towards a Ph.D. It revolves around a core of courses, but, taking into consideration the students' different needs and interests, it will then offer three specialization tracks, each of which will help students develop specific skills: one track will emphasize literature, one will revolve around economic and social sciences, one will be oriented towards foreign-language pedagogy.

After drafting many possible scenarios, we have come up with the following 4-semester structure:

A first semester at Georgetown, covering a core curriculum (3 courses):
 Research methodologies (Critical and Cultural Theories);
 Issues and Perspectives in Italian Studies;
 Italy and the Idea of Europe;

A second semester spent doing graduate coursework at an Italian university, to be selected according to each student's interests:
 Istituto Superiore di Scienze Umane for students interested in literature in view of a Ph.D. and a probable academic career;
 Università Bocconi for students interested in business and social sciences;
 Università per Stranieri di Perugia for students interested in language pedagogy.

While in Italy, students will also have the option of a not-for-credit summer internship with a variety of firms and cultural institutions (such as RAI, art museums, libraries) with which we have already made formal arrangements. Once again, the idea is to offer practical opportunities in the specific field chosen by the student.

A third semester back to Georgetown, to complete additional coursework in their respective tracks (electives in the Italian department and/or in other departments with

which we have secured agreements, such as Linguistics, Government, and German and European Studies)

In the final, fourth semester students will enroll in a required “Thesis Writing Seminar”, write and defend their Master’s Thesis.

As in our undergraduate program, the rationale is a verticality of competencies (research, linguistic, theoretical and cultural skills), with writing as the central component. The thesis should be the point of arrival of a sequence of skills on which students and faculty work starting from the first semester. Therefore, also the work in preparation for the thesis should start at the beginning of the Master. For instance, the “Research Methodologies” course in the first semester will be the first brainstorming occasion for students. In subsequent semesters, we will help students build up competencies in a cogent way. We thought a great deal about the balance of required courses and electives and we are confident it should work, in terms of proportions and of content (all our electives are interdisciplinary and reflect the three tracks we have delineated for our students). Also for study abroad we have compiled a very precise list of courses that students are allowed to take for each track.

Effects of M.A. implementation

While we obviously cannot concretely evaluate, yet, the effectiveness of our MA curriculum until we test it on our future pool of graduate students, we have already meditated a great deal, during the various planning phases, about the main issues to deal with once the Master is activated.

For instance, we will need to work very carefully to make sure that we can offer our graduate courses without a negative impact on the number and quality of choices for

undergraduates. For this purpose, we have secured an agreement with a Fulbright scholar, who each year will teach one of our graduate courses, probably in the field of European and social studies.

We will also probably need to rethink the rationale and the content of our undergraduate “Senior seminar”, to make sure it does not overlap with the graduate “Research methodology” core course. And similar considerations may be necessary for several other course topics in our undergraduate curriculum. We are aware of these issues, and will assess those needs as we begin planning our course offerings for the Fall 2010.

In a complex structure like that of our Masters, the role of the Director of Graduate Studies will be crucial. In addition to the task of mentoring students, the DGS will have to work very closely with the Italian academic institutions where students will enroll. This is an important responsibility, due to the very different dynamics of Italian and US institutions. It is crucial that the DGS help students select specific courses abroad and follow up on the student’s progress at the Italian university of choice.

In conclusion...

This project was born of a synergy of our own teaching staff, of the input of Georgetown and external faculty and administrators, and of students who all provided constructive criticism to our inquiries. The feedback we received from the various Georgetown committees up to the Board, has been, in general, very encouraging, with only minimal objections that helped us linger on aspects of our project we had somewhat neglected.

A particularly enlightening experience of our proposal preparation were the results of the market analysis we conducted. Our research confirmed that no other US

institution of higher education offers a graduate program in Italian studies that combines coursework on campus with a systematic and integral study-abroad component, and with attention to different professional objectives. The enthusiastic feedback we received from the external evaluators we contacted reiterated precisely the uniqueness and value of our project in those terms.

Therefore, we are confident that the program will be of special interest to prospective literature scholars, to high school teachers who want to acquire further understanding of Italian culture, and to those seeking careers in international trade, journalism, fashion and the growing tourist industry. The MLA report *New Structures for a Changed World* stresses the need for language departments to address the needs of a diversified student population, stating that “for those who enjoy literary studies, one path to the major should be through literature. But to attract students from other fields and students with interest beyond literary studies, departments should institute courses that address a broad range of curricular needs”. The different tracks of our Master should answer well to those concerns without sacrificing the identity of either field and track (meaning, without diluting any of the areas of study). We hence feel that thanks to its pedagogical and professional rationale, and to its pioneering curricular innovations, our Master will grant visibility to our department and to our university. And, why not, also an additional source of revenue, which never hurts.