Undergraduate Program Assessment

Department of Linguistics

Student Learning Objectives

- Identify patterns in data
- Hypothesize about underlying structure of language or about language processing.
- Figure out what kind of data could be used to tell whether a hypothesis/theory is right.
- Gather data; use it to test a hypothesis/theory.
- Identify research questions in linguistics that are personally interesting.
- Decide whether an argument makes sense.
- Argue for some conclusion, using good reasoning and/or empirical support.
- Communicate clearly orally and/or in writing.
- Identify some properties that are shared by, and/or that distinguish, natural language.
- Understand the range and complexity of the world’s languages and dialects.
- Value studying and preserving endangered languages.
- Name and describe some major linguistic subfields.
- Describe a significant topic or problem in linguistic theory.
- Understand the purpose of studying language scientifically.
- Identify some ideas that have been important in the development of linguistic theory.
- Have access to a range of methodologies such as those involving computation, experimentation or field work. (new objective)

Assessment tools

- Indirect method: in-house designed senior survey about curriculum, learning objectives, satisfaction with the major.

Highlighted recent activities

- The above-mentioned survey, which was created by a faculty member, was recently administered to graduating seniors. From this, departmental strengths as well as potential areas for improvement were identified.

Based on the results of the in-house survey completed in 2009 and the Graduating Senior Surveys, we have instituted several changes. These modes of evaluation confirmed that we were succeeding in our core goals of teaching students how to reason analytically over complex data sets and how to critically compare competing proposals. However, we also learned from the Graduating Senior Survey that we needed to improve with respect to academic advising and career preparation. We also learned that our students felt that they did not have sufficient access to practicums and field experience, community service, and real life problem solving experiences. The students also noted that their coursework did not involve a lot of memorizing and we are not unhappy about this. Our in-house survey gave us a finer-grained picture on the issues raised in the Graduating Senior Surveys. Students specifically requested greater access to courses that focused on fieldwork, experimentation and computation. These courses also lead directly to greater opportunities for undergraduate research, field experience, and career opportunities. The in-house survey told us that while we were successful in most of our student learning objectives, we needed to do better with conveying the importance of studying and preserving endangered languages. In what follows, we outline these changes.
First, we have increased the number of courses in field methods and historical linguistics, as well as courses based on using computational or experimental methodologies in linguistics. These are courses that almost exclusively attract majors, who are ready for more advanced study and they require the students to draw on facets of their entire linguistic education. In fact, our field methods course has become one of our Integrative Experience courses. This class is also an ideal venue for conveying to our students the importance of the study and preservation of endangered languages.

We are in the process of developing a language technology track within the major. We already have a one year Computational Linguistics sequence and we are planning to add additional courses to give interested undergraduates a solid footing in this fast developing area and prepare them for jobs in language technology. This will in part address the issue of career preparation.

Second, we have modified our approach to undergraduate advising. Given our increase in majors, we had moved to using a mentoring system, which was very effective for some majors, but many were frustrated by the fact that their mentor was not aware of all of the changes in requirements that happened. We now have two dedicated advisors who stay on top of what is required and have made time in their schedules so that they can talk with the students who want it. In order not to lose what was good about the mentoring approach, we have also encouraged and supported the undergraduate club in holding meetings where a faculty person presents their research, their view of the field and their view of career opportunities for linguistics majors. The issue of career preparation was further addressed through the undergraduate club which this year hosted two meetings with a representative from Google, who talked about internships and career opportunities for linguistics majors.

Third, we have increased the opportunity for our undergrads to participate in the ongoing research programs of our faculty and graduate students by hiring them as research assistants. Thus they get to experience that facet of a linguist’s professional life. We have also begun hiring our advanced undergraduates to function as graders/TAs in some of our courses. Again, this gives them a closer view of the academic life.

Finally, a number of our graduating seniors said that they would have liked more advanced and more intensive courses – maybe a capstone course. We are taking the Integrative Experience courses to be like this. They will require the students to draw on material learned in many of their courses in order complete the IE course. We have also decided to regularly offer an Undergraduate Research Seminar to provide a venue for undergraduate research that goes beyond existing classes.

Given the valuable information gathered from this survey and the changes we have implemented in the last few years, we are planning to survey our graduating seniors (and perhaps the rest of our undergrads) in the next year, so that we can evaluate outcome of our changes and see where we need to make more improvements.