

Northern Studies Program Outcomes Assessment

Academic Years 2007-2008 to 2009-2010

Northern Studies graduated 18 students with MA's during the 3 year period under review. We also graduated one interdisciplinary Ph.D. student and one BA student. This outcomes assessment will analyze the data collected from evaluations by faculty and the students themselves on the MA graduates.

Our Outcomes Assessment includes 3 phases of evaluation: assessment of the students' abilities exhibited in the introductory seminar to the program, *Perspectives on the North*, assessment by committee chairs of the students' abilities and growth in the program at the time of graduation, and self-evaluations by the graduates of their skills and growth in the program. The outcomes below are based on the evaluations by faculty and the 14 self evaluations that have been returned.

Quality of writing, fluency and mechanics:

Faculty noted that many of the students had strong writing skills when they entered the program. Nevertheless, almost all noted growth in writing skills during the program. Two noted that the students developed a more academic writing style. Four noted the growth in English proficiency among foreign born students. These comments were reiterated in the responses to value-added during the thesis writing process and through the students' work in the program.

The majority of **students** noted growth in their writing, one noting that she'd learned to write concisely and another noting that he'd become conversant in the language of environmental politics and policy. Two noted the growth in their writing skills thanks to the extensive constructive feedback from their professors. One noted that his writing had improved substantially through the process of preparing for and writing his comprehensive exams.

Analytical skills, including ability to formulate a problem, evaluate evidence, draw conclusions:

The vast majority of **faculty** evaluations affirmed growth in analytical skills, one noting the student's having transitioned from advocacy to critical analysis, and three noting the development of the students' ability to apply theory to practice. Faculty noted a small number of students had very strong analytical skills upon entering the program, but that their thesis work nevertheless stretched their abilities owing to the complexity of the research questions. One noted the growth in cross-disciplinary analysis.

Students were more specific in their evaluations of their growth in analytical skills. Just over half noted that they developed the ability to analyze and synthesize large bodies of literature. Several noted that they learned how to formulate research questions, one of them adding that she learned to reformulate her questions as the focus of her research shifted. A few noted that they

learned to apply theory to practice. One noted explicitly that his analytical skills grew as he studied for his exams and had to organize large bodies of literature.

Research skills, including use of primary sources, archival materials, interviews, journal articles, other scholarly sources:

Faculty reported that their students used a wide variety of sources and methods, including scholarly journals, books, grey literature, primary sources / archival materials, survey data, and newspaper archives. Half of the faculty noted that their students conducted interviews, a couple others analyzed recorded interviews, three did case studies, one analyzed films, and one did modified community-based research. One student developed her own original theory based on a literature review and tested it through interviews with 14 subjects. One student conducted critical comparative analysis of historical maps.

Virtually all of the **students** noted growth in their research skills. Their comments are difficult to quantify but fall into the categories of: increased standards in research in general, experience in surveying and integrating large bodies of literature, experience gained in working with archival materials, experience in conducting interviews, improved historiography skills, and improved critical and creative thinking skills.

What is the nature of the contribution?

It is virtually impossible to coalesce the nature of the contributions of NORS MA students, as they are so varied and individualized. However, broadly speaking, **faculty and students** noted that students used case studies to test theories regarding public policy; they contributed to greater understanding of Alaska and northern history and geography, of the consideration of traditional ecological knowledge in the policymaking process, of northern governance, of environmental policy, of energy policy, of the potential for cultural tourism and of the impacts of socioeconomic and cultural change in the north. Students also created an environmental studies curriculum for middle school students, a Native oral history project and a website on Alaska statehood.

Assessment of value added from beginning of project / thesis work to completion of project or thesis AND Assessment of value added in Northern Studies MA program from student's initial research paper in Perspectives on the North through completion of MA project or thesis:

The vast majority of **faculty and students** noted growth in the students' writing, analytical and research skills. **Faculty** tended to note the growth in the students' ability to analyze systematically very large and complex topics/questions. **Students** tended to note growth through *research experience* and the ability to read, analyze and integrate large bodies of literature. Both noted growth in knowledge of subject areas including Alaska and northern history and geography, northern indigenous peoples and cultures, environmental politics and policy, and

Alaska government and politics/northern governance. Students tended also to note the development of technological skills, including multi-media. Three of the students explicitly noted growth in self-confidence and or professional confidence. One noted greater confidence in drawing her own conclusions based on her research. Two students noted growth through interdisciplinary approach / analysis.

Conclusions and Programmatic Revisions:

The comments we received from faculty and students indicate that students are receiving measurable “value-added” through the development of writing, analytical and other research skills and through the expansion of their knowledge of subject areas pertinent to life in the north. Combined with the employment data we have on our graduates, our outcomes assessment offers evidence of development of marketable capacities. *The vast majority of our graduates are employed in fields directly related to their work in Northern Studies or in positions for which they would not have been qualified without their degrees.*

As for revisions to the process and/or program based on this round of Outcomes Assessment, three findings have led to plans to revise the evaluation forms and another has led us to renew our efforts to expand research and presentation opportunities for our students.

Regarding the process itself, analysis of the evaluations by faculty and graduates showed that our evaluation forms need revision.

- The questions resulted in confusion about what we meant by value-added. We were looking for value to the student (growth in the student and/or development of knowledge base and skill sets), whereas some respondents thought we again were asking about the value of the contribution (to the public) of the student's work. We need to clarify.
- We also need to clarify our questions to elicit separate responses on evaluation of skill levels upon entering versus upon leaving the program.
- We will add an open ended section to elicit students' thoughts on what they would have done differently, in retrospect, and to ask how the program could be improved to better meet their needs.
 - We expect that this addition to the self-evaluation will result in more constructive feedback about how we can improve the program, as well as how we can advise students better as they progress through the program.

As for programmatic changes, the responses indicate that students felt they received measurable value from the program. One deficit that was mentioned relates to a need we had already identified.

- One student noted that he would have benefitted from opportunities to present his research at professional academic conferences.
 - NORS students are encouraged to participate in the Pacific Northwest History Conference through the History Honors Student Group *Phi Alpha Theta*, but that is the only professional conference for which there is an organized effort to promote our students' participation.
 - The cancellation of the UAF Graduate School's travel grant program has exacerbated the problem of lack of funding for students to present their research at professional conferences.
 - We aim to pursue more opportunities for students to present their research at conferences.
- Though this need was not mentioned in the evaluations, we know that our students need financial support for doing field research. We have been able to use the few scholarships and prizes at our disposal to support students' travel to archives located elsewhere or to field research locations, but we recognize that students need more support in this regard.
 - We do not have a solution to this need yet, but we're looking into options.

Attachments:

- List of NORS graduates 2007-2008 to 2009-2010
- Rubric for faculty evaluations of students' abilities, progress and contribution
- Rubric for student self-evaluations