

**Annual Key Assessment Findings and Curricular Improvements**  
**Department of Media Studies**  
**Undergraduate B.A. in Media Studies**  
**AY 2013-2014**

**Key Assessment Findings**

Data regarding passage and failure rates on the department's 2014 senior comprehensive examination as compared with the four prior years appear in Table 1 below. Data for AY 2013-14 indicate a higher failure rate on initial attempts than in past years. Faculty discussed the higher initial failure rate and agreed that, although assigning a definitive cause for the increase would be to commit the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, confusing correlation with causation, the variation was possibly due to two factors: (1) The 2014 exam covered a roughly 20% increase in conceptual terminology (the terminology section of the exam being failed more than in past years, although it has always been the most failed of the three sections); and (2) The department raised the passing threshold for first attempts: Whereas previously students who passed at least two out of three sections were deemed as passing, albeit marginally so, in 2014 the requirement was instituted that students must pass all three sections by the end of the second attempt. This was done because the department recognized that in past years some students, knowing in advance that they had to pass just two sections, would "game" the exam by neglecting to prepare for one section altogether, while putting all of their effort on just two sections. This threshold change rendered obsolete the point system used for grading in past years; final determination of passing rested simply on whether student performance on all three sections was judged by the faculty to meet or exceed expectations as described in the rubric. Thus the results of the 2014 exam are essentially not comparable to prior year results.

While the proportion of students who passed with distinction (possible only on the first attempt) was in line with previous years, for the first time in many years, some students (*i.e.*, two) failed the second attempt and were thereby barred from graduation. Both were outlier cases, however: one student failed due to diagnosed psychological illness causing a leave of absence which prevented him from sitting for the second attempt (so it is not a real failure; the student will take the exam again in 2015). The other student failed because his very poor English language skills and poor overall academic preparation had caused him to be handed from one department to another for a number of years, and yet he had not sufficiently progressed academically. The same student had been found guilty of academic dishonesty multiple times by this department, but the university elected not to suspend or expel him. The department was required by the university to retain the student in the major long after he should have been dismissed. No one was surprised when he did not succeed on the exam. He will return to his country of origin for further intensive language instruction and attempt the exam again in 2015. In short, both full failure cases were anomalous.

Table 2 below is the requisite display of passage and failure rates for each of the three sections of the comprehensive exam, keyed to the exam rubric, which also appears at the end of this document. It is impossible to draw any significant conclusions from this data, however, and not only because the aggregation of all attempts on the exam has the effect of obscuring the nature of the end academic results. (For example, by policy, the result of "pass with distinction" is only

given on first attempts, even though it has happened that some students occasionally submit excellent answers on a second attempt that would have won distinction had they done so on a first attempt.) The problem with drawing conclusions from the data arrayed here is more fundamental than any stemming from such technical issues. The table appears under a title pre-supplied by Office of Financial Planning, Institutional Research, and Assessment, suggesting that the data relates meaningfully to what are lately called “learning outcomes.” The Media Studies faculty wishes to make clear that it does not subscribe to or in any way endorse the mistaken idea that learning in the humanities, an intellectual and ethical activity (an *energeia* in philosophical terminology), can be measured, assessed, or expressed in terms of quantifiable “outcomes,” which are merely terminal points in a physical process or motion (*kinêsis*). This distinction is essential for the humanities. By way of illustration, graduation from college on a date certain is an “outcome”; on the other hand, deepening one’s capacity to recognize when and how to raise and direct critical historiographical questions about a work of scholarship is an intellectual achievement that attends humanistic learning. It is not a quantifiable “outcome.” Granting that “learning outcomes” assessment may have some applicability in instructional areas such as vocational or occupational training, it must be said that that is essentially to equivocate on the meaning of the word “learning” where the humanities are concerned, and that in any case such training is not an enterprise essentially related to a liberal arts education. “Learning outcomes” in the liberal arts setting is thus essentially a conceit and an oxymoron.

We make these points not to be uncooperative but to be clarifying, and we do so out of a responsibility to defend our humanistic mission as a department, one fully in keeping with how Western education has been successfully conceived and carried out for centuries (see <http://mediastudies.cua.edu/mission/index.cfm>). The demand for reductive quantification of inherently qualitative intellectual and ethical experience is not only counter to the educational undertaking of the humanities but actively destructive to it. It is furthermore sharply at odds with education in the Catholic intellectual tradition, which prioritizes *cura personalis* over any calculable result subject to numerical analysis. Interested parties finding themselves puzzled by these truths who yet retain a desire to know how the activity of actual learning fares in this department should attend not to Table 2 but instead read or view the 45 thesis projects, both research papers and documentary films, created by seniors in their capstone seminars. Although it will be impossible to render critical judgment upon these works without considerable expertise in the field combined with long-cultivated humanistic wisdom, such parties may yet learn something, perhaps even to the point of grasping the meaning of these last two paragraphs.

TABLE 1

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA  
Financial Planning, Institutional Research and Assessment

**UNDERGRADUATE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION RESULTS**  
**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES**  
**AY2009-2010 to AY2013-2014**

	Fail		Pass		High Pass		Pass w/Honors		TOTAL
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
AY2009-2010	3	7.70%	34	87.18%	2	5.00%		0.00%	<b>39</b>
AY2010-2011	3	6.40%	42	89.36%	2	4.00%		0.00%	<b>47</b>
AY2011-2012	3	6.30%	42	87.50%	3	6.00%		0.00%	<b>48</b>
AY2012-2013	12	25.50%	32	68.09%	3	6.00%		0.00%	<b>47</b>
AY2013-2014	25	37.31%	39	58.21%	3	4.48%		0.00%	<b>67</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>18.55%</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>76.21%</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5.24%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>248</b>

Note:

- 1) Milestone outcomes were included in the categories High Pass and Pass with Honors if these designations were explicitly indicated in the students' milestone record.
- 2) Category "High Pass" includes both "High Pass" and "Pass with distinction".
- 3) The count in this table is based on the exam outcomes of all attempts in an academic year.

TABLE 2

**Student Learning Assessment Rubric  
Department of Media Studies  
Senior Comprehensive Exam - Both Attempts  
AY 2013-14**

	Level						Total N
	Exceeding Expectations (3pts)		Meeting Expectations (2pts)		Below Expectations (1pt)		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Intellectual capacity							
1) Critical analytical skill applied to interpretation of audiovisual text	4	4%	53	80%	9	14%	66
2) Knowledge of critical and production terminology	1	2%	50	76%	15	23%	66
3) Ability to demonstrate, via essay, comprehension of & engagement with contemporary scholarship	4	6%	47	71%	15	15%	66

Note: 1) The "N" represents the number of students at each level of performance for each trait. N=66 here rather than 67 as in the summary table above, as one student did not retake the exam.

2) The "%" represents the percentage of the number of students falling at the level of performance for each capacity against the total number of students.

### Curricular Changes

The faculty discussed changing the number of critical terms on the exam and decided to reduce it closer to prior levels. Whether this could be considered a curricular improvement is beyond the possibilities of measurement. The faculty discussed the new policy requiring passage on all three sections and determined to leave it in place as a means of buttressing the integrity of the entire exam as a capstone exercise. This may mean typically lower passage rates on first attempts in the future. This was the first year that the third section of the exam had students assess a canonical article in the field alongside more contemporary scholarship making use of and/or responding to the canonical work, rather than have students write on a single recent scholarly monograph. The faculty approved of this as a good change abetting students' integration of knowledge in the field. The faculty discussed holding an information session in the fall, to encourage students to begin preparing for the exam earlier, as well as a question-driven review session in the first week

of the second semester. As a whole the faculty continued to express approval of the intellectual experience of the full senior comprehensive requirement, especially the senior thesis. There is some sentiment that abolishing the comprehensive examination would not significantly diminish the quality of students' overall learning.

The faculty agreed that the single most needed curricular improvement would be the addition of more advanced elective courses taught by new department faculty in important sub-fields it now does not cover, such as international cinema, animation studies, and video gaming. This would be a vast improvement over the current situation, wherein we rely on many cross-listed interdisciplinary courses taught in other departments to fill out the major. This change would not only deepen and broaden students' learning experiences as a whole but concretely prepare them better for their senior capstone requirements and for their eventual careers and future lives. However, despite the department's student-faculty ratio of 39:1 being nearly four times the university's advertised ratio of 10:1, it has not been permitted to hire the additional faculty that would be required to carry out this improvement. Likewise, budgets for adjunct faculty have been cut. It therefore seems likely that future iterations of this report will read more or less identically to this one.

## Media Studies Comprehensive Exam Grading Rubric

Trait	Level		
	Exceeding Expectation	Meeting Expectation	Below Expectation
1. Critical analytical skill applied to interpretation of audiovisual text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive and insightful taxonomy of formal audiovisual elements</li> <li>• Extensive and insightful casual connections between media aesthetics and rhetoric in relation to social and historical context</li> <li>• Insightful, persuasive expression of reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correct and perceptive taxonomy of formal audiovisual elements</li> <li>• Casual connections between media aesthetics and rhetoric in relation to social and historical context</li> <li>• Competent expression of reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorrect taxonomy of formal audiovisual elements</li> <li>• Few clear casual connections between media aesthetics &amp; rhetoric in relation to social and historical context</li> <li>• Incompetent expression reading</li> </ul>
2. Knowledge of critical and production terminology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly fluent in critical and production terminology</li> <li>• Extensive mastery of audiovisual narrative conventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proficient in critical and production terminology</li> <li>• Working knowledge of audiovisual narrative conventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weak or flawed grasp of critical and production terminology</li> <li>• Weak or flawed knowledge of audiovisual narrative conventions</li> </ul>
3. Ability to demonstrate, via essay, comprehension of & engagement with works of canonical and contemporary scholarship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear, insightful thesis</li> <li>• Evidence always supports arguments</li> <li>• Strong grasp of work's relation to field</li> <li>• Organization fully supports thesis</li> <li>• Effective, graceful style abetting meaning, free of grammatical error</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear thesis</li> <li>• Evidence generally supports arguments</li> <li>• Grasps work's relation to field</li> <li>• Organization generally supports thesis</li> <li>• No significant style or grammar problems interfering with meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear thesis</li> <li>• Evidence fails to support arguments</li> <li>• Weak grasp of work's relation to field</li> <li>• Unclear organization</li> <li>• Persistent style &amp; grammar problems interfering with meaning</li> </ul>