

Department of the History of Science
Assessment Update
Spring 2009

The Department of the History of Science has recently implemented a three-pronged assessment strategy for its undergraduate program: first, evaluation by faculty committee of the final papers from the department's capstone seminar (required of all majors); second, an annual report prepared by the faculty member teaching the capstone seminar; and third, exit interviews to assess students' overall experience of the major.

The most recent set of exit interviews showed that a majority of our students have a second major in the sciences, indicating the major's appeal to students seeking to bridge the "two cultures" divide through a humanistic approach to the sciences, medicine, and technology in historical context. The interviews showed that seminar participants' departmental courses varied widely, a reflection of the major's relatively open structure in allowing students to explore the diversity of the department's offerings and facilitating the department's stated aim of providing "special opportunities" for students interested in medicine and other professions. At the same time, the exit interviews indicated the need for fostering a greater sense of community among the undergraduate majors. The department plans to address this issue in conjunction with its continual efforts to improve student performance as assessed through the capstone papers.

The most recent evaluation of capstone essays and report on the capstone seminar suggested that, on the whole, majors had learned the principles of historical methodology and critical analysis essential for researching and writing an extended paper in the history of science, technology, and/or medicine. At the same time, we found that the wide range of writing and research skills among advanced undergraduates was an area that the capstone seminar could better address.

Part of our challenge as a non-traditional major comes from the fact that few students enter L&S with an awareness of our existence. Accordingly, half or more of our majors sign on late in their careers, some even as late as their senior year, although the great majority of our best students are the ones we have been able to nurture for two or more years. The department is studying how the capstone seminar can highlight methodological issues more explicitly, along with building a sense of community among majors.