

Assessment Plan for the Graduate Program in History

May 2013

Program Overview

The Graduate Program in History prepares students for successful employment as professional historians in a variety of settings, including but not limited to colleges and universities. Through focused and intensive reading, collective discussion, and individual mentoring, students learn to do primary research, to analyze and present their findings in writing and in oral presentations, to design classroom and/or public history activities in their areas of specialization, and to understand their roles as members of a professional community. The program offers the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, but under normal circumstances admission to the program is limited to students who intend to go on to the Ph.D.

There are currently 185 students in the program. Until recently, incoming classes consisted of 35-40 students; over the past three years, in response to the crisis in the academic job market, we have reduced our cohort to a yearly average of 19.

The Graduate Program is overseen by a Graduate Council, consisting of a Director of Graduate Studies and three other members of the faculty (selected by the department chair), the members of the Graduate Program staff, and three graduate students (elected by their peers).

Objectives

Students should leave the Ph.D. program as:

- 1. Researchers**, trained in reading historical sources, using historical methods, and articulating historical themes generally; able to synthesize large bodies of scholarship; and expert in the sources, methods and historiography of one subject area;
- 2. Producers of Knowledge**, able to construct an original, significant, and persuasive historical argument based on extensive research in an array of sources, and to present that argument in oral and written form with appropriate scholarly apparatus;
- 3. Educators**, able to design and teach courses on the undergraduate level, or to design and carry out activities, exhibits, or other public historical projects of a comparable scale; and
- 4. Engaged Citizens** of a professional community, aware of its expectations, opportunities, and challenges.

Strategies for Measuring Students' Performance on Program-Level Objectives

Our Assessment Plan for the next five years focuses on particular aspects of objectives 1 and 2: the ability to synthesize large bodies of scholarship and to complete works of original scholarship within the timeframes established by program rules.

While we are of course interested in knowing whether students leaving this program are exemplary interpreters of the historical record, skilled and effective teachers, and effective members of professional communities, we already have considerable evidence that we are meeting these goals: even under dire market conditions, the great majority of our PhDs are gaining academic and other professional employment as historians, which speaks to their general excellence as researchers, writers, educators, and prospective colleagues. We are more concerned about the clarity of our expectations and the efficiency of our students' progress through the program, in particular as they approach the milestones of the M.A., the preliminary exam, and the writing of the first dissertation chapter. Our Assessment Plan reflects these priorities.

1. Assessing the Second-Year Review

In spring 2012, following a year of discussion, the department revised its requirements and expectations for the M.A. for students entering the program from the fall of 2012 onward. Students in most areas are required to complete an article-length research project within the first four semesters.

Beginning in Spring 2014, all students will be subject to a "second-year review," in which their faculty advisor, another faculty member of the student's choice, and a third faculty member (selected by the Director of Graduate Studies in consultation with the advisor) evaluate their research project and seminar performance according to the program's objectives. The faculty members will report their evaluation on a form (draft attached), indicating whether the student may continue to prelims, must do additional work, should receive a terminal M.A., or should leave the program without an M.A.

Over the next 2-3 years, we plan to assess the Second-Year Review in terms of its *process* and *outcomes*.

Process: During the first two years of full implementation (2013-15), we will ask participating faculty and students to assess the review process through a brief questionnaire. We will aggregate these responses, discuss them in Graduate Council and Department meetings, and make appropriate adjustments.

Outcomes: We will measure the success of the Second Year Review in terms of its chief goals: moving students through the MA phase of the program more rapidly and efficiently while better preparing them for professional lives by requiring that their research project be of the scale and scope of a journal article. Over the next 2-3 years the Graduate Coordinator will compile data about 1) the percentage of students achieving the MA within two years, and 2) the number of students who submit some version of their MA project for publication. These results may lead to further refinements to the MA process.

2. Assessing the new sequence of "process" seminars

Nothing matters more to us than that our students learn to read both broadly and thoughtfully, and to communicate their findings with clarity and rigor. Yet years of systematically obtained impressions, as well as a good deal of aggregate data on student progress toward key milestones, have taught us that anxieties about these very abilities can cause student progress to slow (often by a semester or more) at each of *three key moments*: the writing of the MA research paper; preparation for prelim exams; and the early phases of dissertation writing.

In order to improve the quality of student performance on the MA, the prelim exam, and the dissertation, and to help students overcome the anxieties that slow their progress toward these milestones, we have create a new sequence of graduate seminars aimed at mitigating the anxieties and the solitude generally associated with these three phases of a graduate career:

History 800, an "all-field" research seminar which was part of our 2012 MA reform, is now offered each semester; it, or an equivalent specialized research seminar, is required of all students, and during that course of that seminar each student must produce *at least* a 20-page draft of their MA project.

History 952, piloted spring 2013, a prelim-preparation seminar designed to teach efficient strategies for mastering the (often overwhelming) number of books on prelim lists.

History 705, also piloted spring 2013, a "chapter-writing" seminar for dissertators, designed to help students pivot from research to writing and to help them understand what writing a chapter requires--from organizing one's notes and work-day to thoughtfully framing one part of a larger argument.

We will undertake an initial assessment of these new courses this spring, and are developing special evaluations for the faculty and students involved in these courses, aimed at fine-tuning these offerings for subsequent years. But our more significant assessment of their efficacy will come much more slowly. Over the next 5 years, as successive cohorts of graduate students move through the revised program, we will carefully assess aggregate program data to determine whether these courses are shortening the time it takes students to complete the MA, the prelim, and the PhD.

3. Improving the Prelim Process

We know, both from anecdotal evidence and from the results of a graduate Town Hall and a simultaneous survey of graduate students (conducted Nov. 7, 2012), that students feel some confusion about the purpose of prelim exams. We aspire, at some future date, to be able to assess the quality of students' exams across the program and to consider whether we require (as at present) thirteen distinct sets of area prelim requirements. Prior to any such discussions, however, we need some consensus among the faculty as to the purposes and parameters of the prelim.

Toward that end, the Graduate Council is developing a brief survey of faculty opinion on these questions. We hope to administer that survey late this spring, to consider its findings early in the fall, and to produce a document describing the purposes and parameters of the prelim that will become part of our departmental legislation and of our graduate program handbook. This accomplished, we will move on to assess how our current practices do and do not meet these goals.

Timeline for Assessment

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Assessing Second-Year Review	collect data	collect data	assess data; develop recommendations	implement recommendations	
Assessing "Process" Seminars	collect data	collect data	assess 800	assess 952	assess 705
Assessing Prelim Exams	analyze survey; make recommendations	implement recommendations	implement recommendations	assess changes	

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