

Assessment of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning
The University of Wisconsin
Department of History
2009-2010

The Department of History is a community of scholars who are committed to introducing students to the process of historical thinking. Our department is renowned for its commitment to excellence in teaching. It is one of the most highly acclaimed History departments in the nation, with a faculty internationally renowned as teachers and scholars. The Department has 48 permanent faculty members and 789 undergraduate Letters & Science history majors. In addition the Department provides all the courses for the history major and minor in the School of Education's Secondary Education program (adding approximately 150 majors/minors in history and bringing the total to approximately 940). We will confer approximately 315 degrees in the 2009-2010 academic year.

With course offerings that cover much of the globe, from the ancient world to the present, the department offers the foundation of a broad-based education for an informed citizenry. History asks, "How did things get to be this way?" There is nothing in the world that does not become more intriguing and far more mysterious, once we recognize the complicated events and causes that led to its creation. At the same time, history also recognizes that there is far more to the past than the events that created the world we know today. As the British writer L. P. Hartley once famously remarked, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Recognizing what we share with people in the past, while simultaneously exploring how profoundly their lives differed from our own, provides some of history's most fascinating insights. These are among the insights the UW-Madison Department of History has tried to impart through lecture classes, discussion sections, seminars, independent coursework, workshops, guest speakers, and the like.

Ten of our current faculty members have received distinguished teaching awards from the university and sixteen have won departmental teaching awards. The College of Letters and Science also consistently recognizes our teaching assistants for their excellence. Our chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the history honor society, produces an award-winning student publication, *Archive: A Journal of Undergraduate History*. The fine essays in *Archive* represent only a fraction of the exciting, original research undertaken by history majors in their senior capstone courses and in senior theses. The Undergraduate History Association sponsors a variety of social events for its members as well as academic lectures for the wider campus community.

The Department of History's undergraduate assessment plan, drafted by the Undergraduate Council and adopted by the Department in 1996 and revised in 2006, is designed to measure whether students are reaching the goals the Department has set for its majors. The Department conducted intensive assessments of undergraduate learning between 1999 and 2002. In 2005, the Department made significant revisions to the history major. The revised major requires students to have breadth of historical knowledge (geographically and chronologically) and requires them to take

at least four courses in one of twelve thematic, chronological, or geographical concentrations that have a common intellectual theme.

Our assessment plan incorporates a wide variety of measures designed to “enhance innovation in teaching and learning, curricular design, and student services in order to enhance undergraduate student learning and educational experiences.” Since 2007, we have administered exit surveys to our graduating seniors each semester. In addition, in 2009-2010, we administered a bi-annual survey to a sample of 500 majors who graduated between 2000 and 2005. Finally, in 2009-2010, we conducted an extensive review of the capstone seminar by evaluating a sample of course syllabi and student research papers.

Our assessment procedures are designed to measure if students are reaching the goals the Department has set out for its majors:

Learning Goals:

Knowledge.

Students will learn to:

1. Identify different kinds of historical evidence and understand their role in the production of historical knowledge.
2. Understand interpretive debates about the past
3. Describe events and developments in the history of multiple societies in terms of continuity, change, and causation.
4. Distinguish and characterize significant periods of historical experience in multiple societies from different parts of the globe.
5. Appreciate the complexities involved in interpreting societies and social change: for example, the local and the global, particular and general, contingent and structural.

Skills.

Students will be able to:

1. Recall factual claims about the past and synthesize them into coherent interpretive arguments.
2. Read documents closely and critically.
3. Formulate a well-organized, well-supported argument.
4. Demonstrate clear writing in the form of essays of varying lengths.
5. Make cogent oral arguments about readings assignments in the context of a seminar discussion.

6. Conduct original research with primary sources.
7. Locate good, relevant secondary scholarship, and distinguish good scholarship from poor.
8. Observe ethical practices of citation and intellectual self-presentation.

The Department assesses whether or not we are attaining these goals through a variety of instruments, including:

Student papers, from the reader response paper to the substantial research paper
 Student presentations
 Exams and quizzes
 Feedback from Teaching Assistants who supervise discussion sections
 Feedback from undergraduate staff advisers
 Office hours
 Student evaluations
 Reviews of undergraduate papers for Department prizes
 Senior Exit surveys
 Capstone Seminar reviews
 Alumni surveys

Past Assessments:

In the Spring of 1999, 2001, and 2002, the Department conducted web-based surveys of graduating majors. The response rate was relatively strong in 1999 and 2001, but declined in 2002. In the Fall of 1999, two members of the Undergraduate Council evaluated a 50% random sample of History 600 Capstone seminar papers (46 papers). The Committee found that “by and large, the papers met the goals the Department had set for its majors.”

In 2007, the Undergraduate Council revised the senior exit survey. In addition the Department began collecting electronic copies of History 600 Capstone seminar papers for periodic assessment.

2009-2010 Assessment Project & Outcomes:

In 2009, the Undergraduate Council revised the senior exit survey developed in 2007-08 with the help of Elaine Klein in L& S and John Stevenson at the UW Survey Center. The revisions were designed to help us gain a better understanding of, first, students’ command of historical practice, method, and analysis; and, second, of students’ understanding of the transferability of those skills to a range of fields outside of history.

After administering the revised senior exit survey, we learned that there are four major items we must address:

1. Student preparation for capstone courses meant to provide majors with an opportunity to showcase their command of historical practice, method, and analysis
2. Student education about how to transfer the skills of historical practice, methodology, and analysis to fields and careers other than history.
3. Student access to History 600 capstone seminars.
4. Student Access to more small intensive seminars.

In order to prepare students for capstone courses, we have done the following:

- a. Identified courses that have a research component that will help students prepare for the capstone seminar, which we will publicize to students
- b. Initiated conversations among faculty to find ways to make more explicit the skills that faculty already are teaching in their courses (but which may not be apparent to students).

In order to provide students with information about transferring historical skills to other fields, we have done the following:

- a. Organized a series of workshops titled: “What You Can Do With a History Major”;
- b. Invited alums in fields other than history to talk about the ways in which their major in history has been useful to them in their careers (for example, John Rowe, CEO of the Exelon Corporation, met with students over lunch and gave a public presentation about the importance of his historical training in his success);
- c. Organized a series of workshops on preparation for graduate school.

In order to increase access to History 600 capstone seminars, we have done the following:

- a. Worked in collaboration with the School of Education Secondary Education Program to identify alternative courses for Secondary Education history majors that would satisfy the School of Education’s requirement by providing opportunities to conduct historical research. The School of Education Secondary Education Program revised its history major to reflect this change. This reduced the demand on History 600 capstone seminars and will allow faculty to teach more small advanced History 500 seminars, thus addressing the fourth area of concern: student access to more small intensive seminars.

b. Designed a small seminar course to train students early in their undergraduate career to learn the historian's craft. This course, if funded through the Madison Initiative for Undergraduates, will give undergraduate students the opportunity to address a central goal of the MIU: to provide "small, intensive seminar experiences taught by faculty and instructors." It also will satisfy the Communication B requirement. Currently history majors satisfy that requirement primarily in other disciplines. This has the potential of opening up bottlenecks in access to Communication B courses in the College of Letters & Science.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, we administered the following assessment instruments:

1. An alumni survey of a sampling of 500 history majors who graduated between 1999 and 2004 (Appendix A).
2. Two exit surveys of our graduating seniors, one each semester (Appendix B).
3. An extensive review of the capstone seminar of a sampling of course syllabi and student research papers (Appendix C).

Five-year Alumni Survey

Sample

Sample Composition and Selection. Sample for this study was provided by the Wisconsin Alumni Association and was composed of a random selection of **500** UW-Madison college graduates from the period of **1999-2004**.

Field Procedures

Survey Protocol. All cases went through a standard administration protocol as follows:

1. Wave 1 Mailing (2/2/10): Full mailing to all 500 respondents (included a cover letter, \$2 cash pre-incentive, the survey, and a postage-paid return envelope).
2. Reminder Postcard (2/10/10): Sent to all 500 respondents.
3. Wave 2 of Mailing (2/23/10): Full mailing (all Wave 1 materials except incentive) to 349 respondents who had not yet completed the questionnaire and had a valid mailing address.

Data Delivery

Final data delivery took place between March 25th and March 29th, 2010.

Project Overall (n=500)

Interviews	226
Refusals	0
Other Eligible Non-Interviews (excl. Refusals)	264
Unable to Locate	10
Non-Sample	0
<i>Response Rate</i>	45.2%
<i>Cooperation Rate</i>	46.12%

Findings

History graduates expressed a high level of satisfaction with their history major. Over 83% reported that they were very or extremely satisfied with their history major. An even higher proportion, 91.6%, reported that they were very or extremely satisfied with the quality of instruction in the History Dept.

Overall, how satisfied are you with your academic experience as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin –Madison?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 Not at all	1	.4	.4	.4
2 A little	1	.4	.4	.9
3 Somewhat	27	11.9	11.9	12.8
4 Very	114	50.4	50.4	63.3
5 Extremely	83	36.7	36.7	100.0
Total	226	100.0	100.0	

How satisfied are you, overall, with your academic experience as a history major?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid -3 (Blank)	1	.4	.4	.4
1 Not at all	1	.4	.4	.9
2 A little	3	1.3	1.3	2.2
3 Somewhat	32	14.2	14.2	16.4
4 Very	120	53.1	53.1	69.5
5 Extremely	69	30.5	30.5	100.0
Total	226	100.0	100.0	

Think back to when you were an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. How satisfied were you with the following aspects of the History Undergraduate program?

a. Quality of Instruction

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 NOT AT ALL	1	.4	.4	.4
	2 A LITTLE	1	.4	.4	.9
	3 SOMEWHAT	17	7.5	7.5	8.4
	4 VERY	121	53.5	53.5	61.9
	5 EXTREMELY	86	38.1	38.1	100.0
	Total	226	100.0	100.0	

Over half of respondents reported that they believe the history major provided them with a strong foundation for possible graduate study in history, while almost half believe the major has provided them with a strong foundation for possible graduate study outside of history.

Ethnic Studies Requirement. A significant number of graduates (over half of respondents) indicated that they took a history course to satisfy the Ethnic Studies Requirement. And nearly one-third of all respondents reported that the ESR course led them to take a history course they would not have taken otherwise. This suggests that such courses may serve as gateway courses to our major.

Did you take a history class in order to satisfy the Ethnic Studies Requirement?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	-3 (Blank)	4	1.8	1.8	1.8
	-1 (Don't Know)	3	1.3	1.3	3.1
	1 YES	130	57.5	57.5	60.6
	2 NO	89	39.4	39.4	100.0
	Total	226	100.0	100.0	

Did the ethnic studies requirement lead you to take a history course that you otherwise would not have taken?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	-3 (Blank)	5	2.2	3.6	3.6
	-1 (Don't Know)	1	.4	.7	4.4
	1 YES	70	31.0	51.1	55.5
	2 NO	61	27.0	44.5	100.0
	Total	137	60.6	100.0	
Missing	System	89	39.4		
Total		226	100.0		
	Total				
	System				
	Total				

Small Seminars & Earlier Training in the Historian's Craft. Students also asked for more opportunities to take small courses & more contact with faculty in general. Another area for improvement is in offering students opportunities early in their undergraduate career to develop skills essential to the historian's craft. All too often, students enter the History 600 capstone seminar with little or no experience using the library, conducting research in secondary or primary sources, or writing a research paper. Earlier training would enhance our majors' experience not only in the History 600 capstone seminar but in all the intermediate or advanced history courses.

1. In order to prepare students for capstone courses, we have done the following:
 - a. Identified courses that have a research component that will help students prepare for the capstone seminar, which we will publicize to students; and b) initiated conversations among faculty to find ways to make more explicit the skills that faculty already are teaching in their courses (but which may not be apparent to students).
 - b. Identified courses that have a research component that will help students prepare for the capstone seminar, which we will publicize to students;
 - c. Initiated conversations among faculty to find ways to make more explicit the skills that faculty already are teaching in their courses (but which may not be apparent to students).
 - d. Worked with the School of Education to find alternatives to the History 600 capstone seminar. This has reduced demand for the capstone seminar and will allow us to offer smaller seminars.

e. We have also developed a proposal for a new Communication B course that would address our concerns about early training in research, writing, and critical thinking skills. The new course, tentatively titled, HIST 201: The Historian's Craft is designed to:

Expand and coordinate undergraduate research opportunities improve capstone experiences, and improve the educational experience of our undergraduates. In particular, these courses will enrich the undergraduate curriculum of history majors by giving them an early opportunity to experience the excitement and rewards of doing original historical research and conveying the results of their work to others. The new HIST 201 courses will give students a solid grounding in skills essential to the historian's craft, placing a strong emphasis on critical reading, critical reasoning, research, and source evaluation. In other words, students will start "doing" history earlier in their university careers, learning the methods and conventions of historical research, and gaining experience in the written and oral presentation of their work, well *before* taking a capstone (600) seminar. This will enable students to take better advantage of research opportunities early in their academic careers at the UW while also raising performance standards for all undergraduates who take this course. It will also be of great benefit to Letters and Sciences history majors, who take required capstone seminars in their junior or senior years. Finally, it will provide School of Education history majors with training in historical research. We would like to initially offer three HIST 201 courses a semester, serving 270 students a year. By 2012-13 we would like to offer more such courses and make HIST 201 a requirement of the major.

At present, the History Department offers very few lower-level courses that systematically prepare students for conducting historical research, formulating historical questions, and presenting their work to a broader audience in both written and oral forms. As a result, many L&S history majors taking the required capstone 600 seminars have a difficult time understanding a central part of what it means to "do" history—to not just read and analyze texts, but to also research and write like a historian as well as to present their work in oral presentations to peers. Indeed, L&S history majors are themselves keenly aware of this need. At the History Department Undergraduate Program's "Listening Session," held on 6 October 2009, students expressed a desire for more training in methods of historical research as well as for writing instruction specifically geared towards the discipline of history. In particular, they complained about having to write research papers for upper-level history lectures and seminars without having any prior training or experience in doing their own research.

Career Preparation & Advising. Another area identified by students for improvement is the extent to which a history major prepared them for life after graduation.

How well did the history major prepare you for life after college?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Not at all	8	3.5	3.5	3.5
	2 A little	39	17.3	17.3	20.8
	3 Somewhat	118	52.2	52.2	73.0
	4 Very	47	20.8	20.8	93.8
	5 Extremely	14	6.2	6.2	100.0
	Total	226	100.0	100.0	

In order to provide students with information about transferring historical skills to other fields, we have:

a. organized a series of workshops titled: “What You Can Do With a History Major”

.) invited alums in fields other than history to talk about the ways in which their major in history has been useful to them in their careers (for example, John Rowe, CEO of the Exelon Corporation, met with students over lunch and gave a public presentation about the importance of his historical training in his success)

c. organized a series of workshops on preparation for graduate school

We plan to continue these efforts and expand our efforts to prepare students for a graduate study and a variety of careers through workshops and invited lectures.

Bi-annual Senior Exit Surveys

The senior exit surveys are composed of two sections. The first asks students to evaluate their undergraduate academic experience as a history major. The second section is devoted to questions about advising.

Evaluation of the history major.

Students identified many of the same areas for improvement and they expressed an overall satisfaction with their history major. Students asked for more opportunities to take smaller seminars, earlier training and experience writing research papers. The following student response captures a general concern expressed by a number of students:

I think the 600 seminar class should have a pre-req called HOW TO WRITE A SEMINAR RESEARCH PAPER. Too much is expected at the 600 level that was never taught in any class at any level. A 20+ page paper is very different from a 5 page paper. I think if you enroll for a 600 seminar when you get permission for the course you should talk with the professor about your topic. That way you have the coming break (either winter break or summer vacation) to begin your research, if you want. It would give everyone in the class

time for research in their hometowns. OR expect readings like Turabian and Strunk & White to be done before the semester starts.

Other students called for limiting some history courses to history majors and requiring two seminars, one that would prepare them for the History 600 capstone seminar.

Evaluation of advising.

Students expressed great appreciation for the advising staff. One typical response: “I’ve had nothing but great experiences in dealing with the history dept. When I changed majors to history they were very clear, helpful, and understanding. Great job!”

Students also called for more information sessions, especially advising sessions that would help them prepare for the History 600 capstone seminar. A major challenge is to build community among such a large history-major population (789).

We are addressing this by:

1. Holding a variety of workshops for undergraduates, including a workshop advising students on applying to graduate school and a workshop designed to help students apply the skills and training they have gained in the history major to fields other than history, for example.
2. Holding information sessions introducing students to faculty teaching History 600 capstone seminars.
3. Working closely with the Undergraduate History Association to host informal gatherings, such as pizza parties, to bring history majors together.
4. Sending out a weekly email to all history majors highlighting upcoming events, courses, deadlines, and other information.
5. Setting up Facebook for history undergraduate majors.
6. Installing bulletin boards in high-traffic areas in the Humanities Building to alert students to history events and provide important information about opportunities available to history students on campus.

History 600 Capstone Seminar Review

A Subcommittee of the Undergraduate Council reviewed syllabi and research papers from a sample of ten different seminar courses taught since 2007. They read 40 randomly selected research papers (five from each seminar course) and reviewed the following:

1. Research instruction
2. Methodology component
3. Writing instruction
4. Proportion of the course devoted to readings and to research & writing

5. Paper length and number of papers
6. Proposal required
7. Oral presentation
8. Individual meetings required

Findings.

There is a wide variation in length of papers required of students, percentage of time spent on reading vs. research, and whether or not an oral presentation is required. All required that students conduct original research using primary documents, which is a central goal of the History 600 capstone seminars. Most instructors required students to submit a paper proposal, but the assignments vary dramatically, as does the date by which students are expected to have workable topics. Many of the seminars did not have a strong oral presentation component, although most required some type of oral presentation. But this, like every aspect of the syllabi, varied enormously. All of the models were plausible and interesting. Faculty assigned a variety of creative assignments.

Student representatives on the Undergraduate Council reported that “it can be hard to pick a seminar because they tend to be so specific in their themes, but this can be good—it can lead to interests you don’t realize you have.” Another noted that his “seminar experimented with Kindles, oral presentations were very important, including a very intense final conference.”

While a third reported that “students in my seminar wanted a more detailed syllabus—much of what we did was announced as we went along in the course.” A fourth student added that students “get a good sense from the info session of the variation in the 600s.”

Recommendations.

In short, the capstone seminars vary widely, but they do meet the original goal of providing our majors with a way to draw on all they’ve learned in their undergraduate training to carrying out an original research project.

The challenge is to recognize the value of variety in our History 600 offerings, the importance of fostering faculty independence and creativity, while assuring that we satisfy the requirements of the History 600 capstone seminar. In order to meet this challenge, we recommend:

1. A broad faculty discussion about the overarching goals of the History 600 capstone seminar. One outcome of this discussion could be a request that instructors indicate on their syllabi which of the goals their seminars meet.
2. Coordinating with the newly-convened Undergraduate Skills Review Committee to articulate a set of goals for the capstone seminars that faculty may use as a benchmark in designing 600 courses and offer minimum uniform guidelines.
3. Review student evaluations of History 600 seminars and correlate their responses with course syllabi.

Appendix A Summary of 5-year Alumni Survey Responses

Appendix B Senior Exit Surveys (Fall 2009 and Spring 2010)

Appendix C History 600 Capstone Seminar Review

Appendix D Communication B Proposal