

Department of History of Science
Current Assessment of the Graduate and Undergraduate Majors
Summer 2008

Since adopting a revised plan in 2006, we have conducted two kinds of assessments at the undergraduate level and two at the graduate level. For undergraduates, a faculty subcommittee is appointed to read the research papers produced for our 555 capstone seminar. The goal of 555 is to teach skills in empirical research, critical analysis, and historical prose that form the basic competencies of students graduating with a degree in our subject. In 2007, the 555 course had to be taught by one of our advanced graduate students, a rare exception to our practice of having this course taught by regular faculty. The eleven papers resulting from that seminar were read by two of our regular faculty, who found one third of those papers were first-rate, another third or more were satisfactory, and approximately one-quarter fell below what we would normally consider to be our minimum standard. In 2008, seven majors took the seminar. The faculty subcommittee has not yet a chance to read the papers produced from this seminar, but after grades had been submitted we conducted interviews with the 555 participants (our second form of undergraduate assessment) and obtained some useful feedback. All of the students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the major in general and the quality of advising they received, but they did criticize the department's lack of integration of undergraduates into its normal activities, such as weekly Brown Bag meetings, colloquia, and other programmatic activities. This is an area of concern which we plan to address at an upcoming faculty retreat at the end of August.

Graduate assessment consists of interviews with departing students – not just Ph.D. or M.A. students, but *all* departing students – conducted by Robin Rider, the head of special collections in Memorial Library and a senior lecturer in our department. Up until the past three or four months, there had been a bit of a lull in students leaving the program, so Dr. Rider has not had enough of a sample to produce a full report, but expects to do so in the coming year, based on discussions with the half dozen students who have graduated. The quality of faculty mentoring continues to be of concern for us, and will be discussed at our upcoming retreat. Three years ago, the department also instituted a second assessment, consisting of a formal review of first-year graduate students at the very start of their second year (a postponement that allows them a chance to clear up any incompletes). Students receive a written digest of the faculty comments from these reviews, along with suggestions for improving their performance, if any improvements are thought necessary. They are also invited to discuss the review in greater depth individually with faculty. Only about a half dozen students have gone through these reviews so far, and the result has been largely satisfactory for both the faculty and the students.

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