

Student Learning in Degree Programs

Unit: History

Date: May 2, 2008

Unit Head approval:

Graduate Program:

SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Brief description of changes or improvements made in your unit as the result of assessment results since 2000.

The graduate program in History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign engages in a process of continuous self-study, innovation, and evaluation of individual students and departmental policies. Most of these efforts are undertaken by the Director of Graduate Studies in consultation with a Graduate Studies Committee. This results in continuous outcomes assessments and ensuing initiatives large and small, from the level of individual students' programs to departmental policies, including but not limited to:

1. Annual evaluations of first- and second-year students, undertaken by the faculty as a whole, who fill out forms evaluating student work in courses, and administered through the Director of Graduate Studies, who meets personally with each first- and second-year student and an advisor in May to evaluate past achievements and chart the course forward. This has succeeded in some improvement in time-to-degree.
2. The Ph.D. Program Plan (recently revised into the Ph.D. Portfolio Review, see below), which provides a more comprehensive assessment of student achievement at approximately 2 to 2 ½ years and involves a recommendation as to whether the student should proceed to prelims and then ABD status.
3. Regular assessment of students' accomplishments as TAs undertaken by the TA Coordinator in consultation with the DGS and instructors teaching with TAs.
4. Regular assessment of general policies in the graduate program, including course requirements, preliminary examination guidelines and administration, mentorship guidelines, and professional preparation of graduate students through workshops and forums. This work takes place in the Graduate Studies Committee, made up of faculty and graduate student representatives, and over the last several years has resulted in more transparent guidelines for mentoring and preliminary examination preparation, workshops on fellowship applications, proposals for better completion rates among female graduate students, diversity in the department more generally, lecture writing and general professional preparation.

In addition to this long-established departmental culture of continuous graduate program evaluation, in the period 2000-2008, the graduate program of the Department of History was involved in three formal assessment projects that resulted in major changes and improvements: the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), from 2002-2005, the Diversity Workshops undertaken in 2005-06, and the Departmental Self Study and External Review undertaken in 2006.

CID: The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate involved the Director of Graduate Studies (Clare Crowston for the duration of the CID) in attending several Carnegie-initiated meetings to discuss the objectives of doctoral training in History in terms of habits of mind, skills, professional preparation and other goals. Ideas from these meetings were brought back to a Carnegie committee in the department to discuss possible program improvements and innovations. In addition, the department brought previous graduate students back to campus to discuss the effect of their training on their current careers, and engaged departmental forums on the success and needs of the graduate program. These discussions generated a number of areas where the program could be strengthened, especially (1) first-year cohort-building and introduction to historical scholarship and (2) an improved set of milestone checks on student progress through program requirements in order to lessen time-to-degree by clearly mapping expectations and achievements. The department's CID committee and Graduate Studies Committee then combined to draft proposals to address these areas, which were presented to the department in December 2004. The proposals included:

1. A first-year sequence required of all entering students introducing them in the first semester to large historiographical questions, methods and resources for historical research especially as practiced at UIUC, and hands-on development of skills and practices of historical research. The final product of the Fall "Approaches to History" section of this course is a research proposal reflecting these skills and preparing the student for the second semester "Research Seminar." Team-taught by faculty of divergent chronological and regional specialties, the research seminar leads students through a staged process of the research and writing of an article-length piece of original historical scholarship. Students consult with mentors who are experts in the specific fields of their research for historiography and archival recommendations, while getting training in cross-field standards and methods of argumentation, narration, time-management, document analysis with the cross-field class. Research projects are presented orally at symposia at the end of the semester.
2. A proposal expanding and formalizing more frequent checkpoints and evaluations of student progress through the program, in order to render requirements more transparent at each stage and ensure timely completion of requirements. This proposal advocated an elaboration of the Graduate Studies Committee's then current evaluation of first-year students, which involved the assessment of confidential faculty reports followed by the issuing of a short letter of evaluation from the Director of Graduate Studies. The Carnegie/Grad Studies Committee proposed that each first and second year student should meet with an actual or

prospective major advisor and the DGS at the end of the academic year to review faculty reports (which are still turned in), discuss student progress, and map out next steps in the students' curriculum and trajectory through the program. It also proposed that the "pre-defense", a meeting of the dissertation committee to discuss the dissertation draft 6 months to a year before the expected defense date involve a report on the part of the major advisor to the DGS on the meeting that would serve as a further "check point" between ABD status and Ph.D. degree completion.

3. A set of Preliminary Exam guidelines were also mandated (to be drawn up in 2005) in order to render more transparent the prelim preparation process, reduce the span of time in which prelims are completed below two-semesters (the previous limit), and provide for closer connection between coursework and prelim preparation by the inauguration of a "prelim preparation" coursework option, whereby a student could contract for a special writing assignment, such as an annotated bibliography, to replace the standard long paper in ONE course taken to satisfy ONE of the three preliminary examination fields.

These proposals were accepted by the department and have become department policy.

The three proposals were approved and implemented beginning in Fall 2005. They have produced ongoing assessments and innovations. The first-year sequence proposal, in particular, mandated a review of the sequence after three years. This assessment process was completed in the 2007-08 academic year through an on-line survey of faculty and graduate students on the purposes and effectiveness of the first-year course, focus-group discussions among faculty and graduate students about the course, and the preparation by the graduate committee of proposed revisions to the form of the course to begin in Fall 2008. This evaluation resulted in a process (currently underway) of generating a clearer template of skill-based assignments to guide the preparation of the "Approaches to History" syllabus each term, and new, more transparent arrangements regarding the responsibilities of instructors, project mentors, and students in the research seminar. In addition, it has been decided that the research-seminar will not be required of students for whom field-specific research seminars are available during the same semester it is offered.

Diversity Workshops: In the academic year 2005-06, in response to some concerns about workplace conditions within the department voiced by graduate students, the graduate program held a series of diversity workshops in order to generate an agreed upon code of conduct for behavior among faculty and students in a diverse workplace and a procedure for handling student to student grievances, as well as a conversations about issues of diversity and the departmental curriculum. We had the help of Dr. Joycelyn Landrum-Brown of the Program on Intergroup Relations who helped us lead some agenda setting workshops addressing issues raised by our graduate students, which produced two faculty-graduate fora on diversity that helped formulate workplace and programmatic changes designed to improve our retention of a varied graduate student and faculty

community. The Code of Conduct and grievance procedure are currently awaiting Graduate College consultation while curricular discussions are ongoing.

Self-Study and External Review: Finally, the Department of History planned and carried out an external review undertaken in Fall 2006 on the basis of a self-study document prepared during the 2005-06 year. This self-study and external review involved, among other things, a careful narration of innovations and developments in the graduate program on the part of recent DGSs, an on-line survey of graduate students regarding their needs and concerns, as well as meetings with graduate students and the external review team that visited in October 2006. Prominent among the External Review report's recommendations for the Graduate Program were a revised method of administering written preliminary examinations (along with the possibility of a revision of the very form of examinations themselves) and improved funding for graduate students. While the department is pursuing the latter goal through ongoing development efforts, the former recommendations resulted in more immediate improvements. The Graduate Studies Committee of 2006-07 was charged with developing a new method of administering preliminary exams, which had been administered as five-hour tests taken in a windowless computer lab with antiquated equipment. After investigating preliminary processes in a number of peer institutions and resources available for alternative administration systems at UIUC (e.g. in remote computer labs with better equipment), the Graduate Studies Committee in Spring 2007 proposed a move to take-home preliminary examinations. A new scheduling form involving an honor code agreeing that no pre-written text will be used in the exam and laying out new procedures was approved by the department and has been in use since Fall 2007.

Though the Graduate Studies Committee chose to reform the administration of exams rather than taking up the wider agenda of changing the form of exams in 2007, other innovations did result from the External Review process and its consideration of alternate ways that graduate students might demonstrate their mastery of historical fields and techniques. One suggestion of the External Review committee—the preparation of a portfolio of work rather than a formal exam—was developed into a new proposal for the “Ph.D. Program Plan” which has long functioned as the mechanism for assessing passage from the 1st (MA) to the 2nd (Ph.D) phase of graduate coursework in the History Program. In the Spring of 2007 the Graduate Studies Committee recommended to the department the “Ph.D. Portfolio Review” to replace the Ph.D. Program Plan, as the plan—a form accompanied by an advisors' recommendation and confidential reports from faculty who have taught a student—tended to be haphazardly prepared and often too rapidly assessed by the Graduate Studies Committee. The Portfolio Review involves the availability on-line of research and historiographical papers by the students under review, their own statement of progress. Faculty write individual assessments based on these documents, and advisors write supporting letters. The entire portfolio is then reviewed by the graduate studies committee prior to a student continuing on to preliminary examinations (though it can happen before that point). This system of review was inaugurated in Fall of 2007.

SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

(a) PROCESS: Brief description of the process followed to develop or revise this assessment plan.

The need for an assessment plan was discussed in the Graduate Studies Committee, which was currently in the process of assessing the first-year sequence. This first-year assessment process was utilized for the formulation and planned assessment of wider departmental goals, alongside the External Review and its survey of graduate student perspectives, the “Program Profiles” available through the Graduate College with its information on completion and time to degree, and the general purposes of graduate education in history addressed in such documents as the department’s Degree Requirements, Guidelines for Adviser/Advisee Relations, Preliminary Examination Guidelines for Examiners and Examinees and previous assessment plans. The plan was reviewed by the Graduate Studies Committee, Chair, and Faculty.

(b) STUDENT OUTCOMES: List Unit’s student learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes).

A. General History Graduate Program Goals

Outcome 1. Reasoning and research skills to identify, design, and successfully conduct research on significant problems;

Outcome 2. Professional competence in the field, with emphasis on three specialized areas of training, one of which must be thematic-comparative to prepare for scholarly professions in a global environment

Outcome 3. Detailed critical understanding of a particular historical problem, or set of related problems, based on research in primary sources and presented in relation to the work of other scholars.

Outcome 4: Professional development and preparation, leading to active research, teaching and/or other job and ongoing service to the profession through training of students, scholars, and the public

B. Specific Learning Outcome Objectives: Knowledge

Outcome 5: Detailed comparative knowledge of more than one of the world’s societies developed across well-conceptualized themes

Outcome 6: Professional competence in one of the recognized research and teaching fields

Outcome 7: Specialized competence in one or more research areas within a field.

Specific Learning Outcome Objectives: Skills

Outcome 8: Basic critical scholarly skills such as reading for an argument, evaluating method, situating historical scholarship in its larger intellectual context, interpreting primary sources, applying conceptual categories of analysis, and the ability to produce basic genres of historical writing including critical reviews, historiographical essays, research proposals, articles and monographs.

Outcome 9: The ability to contribute critically to the development of historical theory and methodology.

Outcome 10: The ability to conceptualize, design, and implement research on significant historical problems.

Outcome 11: The ability to share, exchange, and publish research findings and conceptual innovations to the discipline and a wider public

Specific Learning Outcome Objectives: Attitudes

Outcome 12: Promote cross-cultural awareness, and the understanding of the historical origins of cultural differences, in the profession, the classroom and the community; and

Outcome 13: Subscribe to the ethical codes of the historical discipline, as exemplified in the American Historical Association's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct (1998) and the Department's Code of Conduct for a Diverse Historical Workplace (2006)

(c) MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES:

Outcomes 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11 (basic scholarly and advanced research and conceptual skills)

1. Successful completion of first-year sequence as judged by instructors and mentors of course
2. Ongoing assessment of first-year sequence through graduate course evaluations and periodic survey assessment

Outcomes 2, 5, 7 (specific field knowledge)

1. Satisfactory completion of coursework in three fields of preliminary examination, assessed by grades and faculty reports in evaluations
2. On-line Student Evaluation of graduate courses to ensure fidelity to their goals

Outcomes 1,2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (Overall research skills and field knowledge)

Regular mechanisms of graduate student evaluation including

- a. First- and second-year evaluations submitted by faculty and reviewed by DGS with the student and his/her advisor or prospective advisor

- b. The Ph.D. Portfolio Review, usually submitted by the end of the second or beginning of the third year, involving departmental review of research and historiography achievements, assessed by Graduate Studies Committee

Outcomes 2 & 5 (professional competence in three fields of knowledge, at least one comparative):

Successfully passing three written exams administered by a departmentally-approved committee of least five faculty members and one verbal preliminary examinations administered by a Graduate College-approved committee of at least four faculty members;

Outcomes 8, 9 & 10 (conceptual and methodological knowledge and skills)

Completion of “Approaches to History” in first year and at least one additional required course in methods or Social Theory.

Outcomes 1, 3, 7, 9 (research skills and contribution to scholarship)

Completing the design, research, analysis, interpretation, writing and verbal defense of a Ph.D. dissertation, including an intermediate “pre-defense” meeting with committee to direct student to areas where dissertation could most use work in final 6 months of preparation

Outcomes 4 & 11 (employment, publication, etc.)

1. Placement of our graduates in tenure-track appointments is a valuable index, grounded in the assessments of our colleagues at other institutions, of how well our students have mastered their fields, engaged with central debates, and emerged as responsible professional teachers and researchers. We aim to place 75% of our graduates in tenure-track positions within two years of completion, and we have begun to meet this goal consistently.

2. Completion data compiled for the recent NRC assessment and maintained in the Program Profiles project of the Graduate College will help us assess our ability to retain and motivate graduate students toward timely completion of degree

3. A tracking of prizes for dissemination and publication of written work will help to measure our success at promoting students’ professional research and publication abilities

Outcomes 12 & 13 (attitudes, ethics)

Implementation of our grievance procedures and monitoring of grievances related to the Code of Conduct will help to measure our success in implementing a workplace welcoming to diverse students and faculty

ICES responses to questions on our students' sensitivity to cultural differences as TA's will measure success in fostering these attitudes

SECTION 3 : PLANS FOR USING RESULTS

(a) PLANS: Brief description of plans to use assessment results for program improvement.

1. Continued evaluation of first-year sequence to improve initial introduction of conceptual and research skills introduced by program
2. Plan to focus more attention on results of first-year evaluation, so students will clearly understand areas of strength and weakness and focus efforts on skills and knowledge central to learning goals in a timely manner
3. Use new departmental graduate course evaluation system (to be implemented Fall 2008) to encourage review and improvement of graduate course delivery by faculty
4. Communication with students who publish and win writing prizes to identify what program does and can do better to facilitate successful professionalization
5. Bring Portfolio Review into a Phase Two in which Graduate Studies Committee uses posted papers to assess program's success at developing conceptual and research skills and makes general recommendations for course/curricular practices based on evaluation at regular intervals (every one to two years).
6. Communication with past graduates to assess placement and career success in relation to program learning objectives.

(b) TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

2008-2010 consolidate data from first-year evaluations, Portfolio Review and course evaluations into agenda items for course and program improvement related to development of skills that promote time to degree

Fall 2009 Use faculty retreat to disseminate and discuss best practices suggestions for graduate courses in relation to knowledge and skills objectives. Also discuss underrepresented recruitment as important component/measure of success in fostering Outcome 11—cross cultural awareness

2010-2012 On the basis of faculty retreat recommendations, implement teaching/mentoring best practices to improve learning outcomes. Monitor Program Profiles data to see whether improved delivery enhances time-to-degree and completion rates. Monitor underrepresented recruitment/time to degree as measure of diversity and attitude objectives.