

Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving Student Learning in Degree Programs

Unit: History

Date: May 8, 2008

Unit Head approval:

SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

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

In the period 2000-2008 the agenda for the undergraduate program of the Department of History was set by the assessment plan written in 1997 and by our involvement in two formal assessment projects, the Departmental Self-Study and External Review, both undertaken in 2006, that resulted in changes and improvements.

The Departmental Self-Study and External Review undertaken in 2006 praise the strong commitment of the faculty and the graduate assistants to high-quality teaching and note that this commitment finds reflection in the many awards and distinctions that our faculty and graduate teaching assistants have earned. Both documents begin with the premise that the undergraduate program is already of high quality. Both then ask what stresses are at work in it and how they could be reduced and the program improved.

Both documents recommend the importance of plans to transform the post, responsibilities, resources, and pay of the Director of Undergraduate Studies. The goal is to provide a central, coherent leadership for the development and sustenance of the program. The Self-Study suggests a variety of innovations that could improve the undergraduate experience by building community among the undergraduate majors and between undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Regarding majors, the Self-Study notes the introduction of the required History 200 as an opportunity to shift from the usual chronological and geographical themes toward new methodologies, narratives, and historiographies; it emphasizes the importance of the required History 498 (capstone research seminar) as a research experience; and points to the wide array of courses and the utility of encouraging undergraduates to use that variety in creating an area of concentration.

Both the Self-Study and the External Review recommend several improvements that will set the agenda for the department in the coming years. They stress the need to better communicate to students a coherent image of history as an enterprise marked by common concerns rather than a random collection of courses. Both reports suggest that need for the curriculum and its content to reflect the debates that inform current scholarship and ideas about teaching. The reports urge the department to expand on the opportunities in the department for the pursuit of public history in the curriculum. Finally, both reports emphasize the need to attend to building and fostering community in the undergraduate history experience through more contact between undergraduates and among undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

The following four areas have seen major changes since 2000:

1. Regarding the curriculum, the most substantial change that has been implemented since the 1997 Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan is the creation of History 200, "Introduction to Historical Interpretation." This new course, taught by 6 or 7 faculty members each semester in free-standing sections capped at 25 students, is a direct response to the curricular needs identified in the 1997 report. It is now a requirement for history majors and serves as the gateway to the major. The course delivers a mix of methodology and content, introducing students to specific topics that allow them to isolate historical questions, identify methodological problems, and evaluate primary sources against secondary accounts. These courses de-center traditional areas of study by encouraging students to reflect on the analytical units deployed in writing about history. The overall pedagogical aim is to offer students a series of problems provoked by specific questions and to provide students with hands-on experience with the analytical and argumentative nature of history.

2. The restructuring of the responsibilities and duties of the Director of Undergraduate Studies began in January 2007 with the appointment of a faculty member as the DUS to take over many of the responsibilities formerly held by an academic professional. This change has improved our outreach to students and our involvement as a faculty with curricular issues. The DUS now has significant authority and oversight of the curriculum and the teaching program. Dramatic renovation of the undergraduate advising suite in 300 Gregory Hall has created offices for the DUS, the Director of Graduate Studies, and our new Undergraduate History Advisor, an academic professional. The new suite represents our efforts as a department to attend to our undergraduate program in different ways. Our academic advisor not only serves on the Undergraduate Studies Committee but also has been working to systematize the undergraduate program. His goals have been to ensure that the standards and requirements of the major are applied consistently among all of our majors and that the needs of our majors receive the support of the departmental faculty and staff.

3. The Department of History is committed to making the Honors Program more visible to our majors (who can qualify for it with a GPA of at least 3.5) and to increase the number of students who selects this option. In the service of the Honors Program we have developed honors courses (each offered under the number 495) in the department. After staffing two sections of the course annually since its introduction in 2004, we have responded to the increased demand by running three sections of the course in 2008-2009. These courses afford small groups of highly motivated undergraduates to carry out research and writing under the direct supervision of faculty.

4. The number of history majors stands at over 600. To encourage greater engagement with history as a discipline and as an academic interest, the department has devoted significant resources to growing a community of history majors. To that end we have transferred the membership and leadership of the UIUC chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the national history honors society, to the undergraduate history majors with the expectation

of building more community among our majors. In spring 2007 we inducted into the society a class of 60 new undergraduate members who then elected five officers to lead the organization. The number of inductees in 2008 was again close to 60.

SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

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

The process of developing this assessment plan found its source in the department-wide discussions that surrounded the year-long process of Self Study (2005-2006) and the preparations for and discussions of the External Review (fall 2006). The specifics of this plan are the product of meetings by the department's Undergraduate Studies Committee which includes the DUS, faculty members, and the academic advisor along with undergraduate and graduate student representation. This report was presented to faculty for consultation on May 8, 2008. A wider discussion will follow in fall of 2008. Meetings will also be held with Phi Alpha Theta, the history honors society in order to get undergraduate perspectives, input, and suggestions. The discussion of the department's goals will culminate in a faculty retreat planned for fall 2009.

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

Outcome 1: Acquiring historical knowledge; replacing students' misunderstanding of history as a discipline in which experts assemble uncontested facts into an objective story. Suggesting instead the diverse methods of research and means of interpretation that historians invoke.

Outcome 2: Improving students' ability to write and speak clearly and effectively; empowering them to criticize, explore, and develop their own perspectives and interpretations, and to research and support their own logical arguments.

Outcome 3: Discriminating between a primary and a secondary source and their uses in research.

Outcome 4: Obtaining tools to decode, contextualize, interrogate, and derive meaning from primary sources; recognize the variety of primary sources, and the importance of better drawing inferences by locating them in historical context (how, when, and for whom they were produced; human agency behind their production).

Outcome 5: Learning how to identify and assess central arguments, themes, perspectives, and theoretical frameworks of secondary sources.

Outcome 6: Appreciating the complexity of historical causation.

Outcome 7: Learning to think historically and to carry out historical research: planning and carrying out a historical research project; formulating historical questions and arguments, while locating and deploying historical data to answer or support them; comparing, contrasting, and exploring relationships among multiple primary and secondary sources; improving ability to comprehend historical narratives; improving ability to think analytically and logically while applying historical perspectives.

Outcome 8: Grasping both the foreignness of the past and the ways that the past shapes and gives meaning to their own lives and to society at large.

Outcome 9: Broadening a capacity for empathy through an appreciation of shared humanity and the diversity of the human experience, as influenced by culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and class in a matrix of time and place.

C. MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO ASSESS OUTCOMES

100-level courses: comprehend/recognize: telling a primary from a secondary source; recognizing the variety of useful primary sources and learning how to analyze them; recreating a historical context and connecting it to a document; beginning to empathize with people from another place and time

200-level courses: interpret and apply. Many of the same skills are emphasized in the 200-level courses as in the 100-level, but in more depth. History 200, "Introduction to Historical Interpretation," which serves as the gateway to the major, introduces students to specific problems that allow them to isolate historical questions, identify methodological problems and evaluate primary sources against secondary accounts. This experience offers students a series of problems provoked by specific questions and provides students with hands-on experience with the analytical and argumentative practices of history.

300- and 400-level courses: explain and evaluate: dealing with ambiguity and contradiction in historical sources; comparing and contrasting diverse and potentially conflicting primary sources for a single historical problem; weighing trustworthiness and value of different sources; recognizing major arguments, themes, and theoretical frameworks in primary and secondary sources.

History 498, the "Research and Writing seminar," our capstone course: create: producing one's own historical work by connecting, building upon, evaluating, developing relationships among, and synthesizing multiple primary and secondary sources.

In order to assess the efficacy of our program we will take the following measures:

For Students:

1. To ensure that we are meeting outcomes 1-4, the Undergraduate Studies Committee will consider establishing a writing assessment for a sample of students in our 100- and 200-level courses. The assignment will consist of the analysis of a primary source evaluated with a grading guide produced by the Undergraduate Studies Committee.
2. Survey majors about the gateway course (200) and the capstone (498). Questionnaire to address student satisfaction with academic requirements of program, especially outcomes 5-9.
3. Conduct focus groups among majors to discuss the effectiveness of the undergraduate history major. These would be held with selected groups of undergraduates once each year, probably early in the spring semester.

For Faculty:

1. Faculty self-assessment based on questionnaires produced by the Undergraduate and Graduate Studies committees.
2. Evaluation of syllabi and papers in 200 and 498.
3. Workshops for faculty to identify weaknesses and strengths in the curriculum.

SECTION 3: PLANS FOR USING RESULTS

A. PLANS: Brief description of plans to use assessment results for program improvement

1. Now that History 200 is in place as the gateway course, our task is to compare the learning outcomes of History 200 and History 498 to see how effectively these core courses are teaching the skills of research, historiography, and critical reasoning. We are collecting papers from a sample of classes at both levels to develop a method of evaluation that will assess outcomes. Future recommendations will emerge from the results of this study.
2. Led by the Undergraduate Studies Committee, the department will evaluate the curriculum as a whole. Our aim is to better communicate to students a coherent image of history as an enterprise marked by common concerns. Although faculty are interested in diverse areas of concentration, students majoring in history often assemble a random collection of courses. We want to examine the curriculum to ensure that in its structure and content it reflects the debates that inform current scholarship and ideas about teaching. We will evaluate the extent to which our courses examine and interrogate new methodologies, narratives, and historiographies.

3. We will encourage students to create an area of concentration in their studies in order to bring coherence to the curriculum.
4. We will continue to improve and expand the Honors Program by encouraging students who qualify to pursue the "honors track." We will evaluate the program as a whole, its mission and the entering and continuing qualifications.
5. We will continue building community through Phi Alpha Theta including a program of service learning; and the development of a History Day to showcase ongoing scholarship in the department in which undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty will participate.
6. We will evaluate and seek to reduce the deleterious effects of growing constraints on resources. Rising enrollments have forced enlargement of our introductory courses and cuts in TA support have forced 200-level courses to shift to large-format lecture courses with no discussion sections and shifted graduate students from TA'ships to graderships.

B. TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

AY 2008-2009: Tasks for the Undergraduate Studies Committees

Collect papers from sections of History 200 (gateway course) and History 498 (capstone course). Develop an assessment instrument with which to evaluate the papers and the degree to which the outcomes we most desire have been achieved. Organize workshops for faculty in which we discuss the outcome of this assessment and ways in which to address possible weaknesses or inconsistencies in the results.

Evaluate the Honors Program, its mission, and the entering and continuing qualifications.

Evaluate the curriculum as a whole. Examine the curriculum to ensure that in its structure and content it reflects the debates that inform current scholarship and ideas about teaching. Evaluate the extent to which our courses examine and interrogate new methodologies, narratives, and historiographies

AY 2009-2010: Tasks for the faculty as a whole

Faculty retreat, fall 2009. Presentation of the Undergraduate Studies Committee findings and recommendations about the curriculum as a whole. Faculty-wide discussion of the outcomes assessment and the best ways to move forward. Crafting new charges for the work of the DUS and the Undergraduate Studies Committee.