

Assessment Report for the Department of History
Covering the Calendar Year 2009
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April 2010

Introduction

This report describes the results of assessment instruments administered in HIST 2302 Methodology during the spring, summer, and fall terms of 2009. The results and this report show the commitment of the History Department at the University of West Georgia to reflect on course offerings and the overall quality of the undergraduate program. This report concludes with recommendations based on the results discussed below.

In spring 2009 the History Department approved substantial changes to the department's assessment activities. It stopped using the ACAT examination because that test did not test what the department wants its majors to know. A revised assessment examination was administered in Methodology.

In addition, this report collects data reported to the Department in 2009 on the performance of history majors taking the GACE examination for 2007-2008. Thirteen students from West Georgia took the GACE History Test I and History Test II and all of them passed both tests.

Methodology: Spring, Summer, Fall 2009, Dr. Schroer

At the beginning of each semester students in HIST 2302 take an assessment examination to help the History Department determine how successfully the survey courses, and some upper-level courses, have prepared students for the upper-level courses in the major. Students are informed that they must write the assessment exam, but it will not be graded. Below I reprint the questions from the exam and assess student answers. Department members may read students' blue books from this exam if they want to learn more. This is a shorter version of the examination than was taken in previous years.

Assessment examinations

1. *Describe in a paragraph essay what work you have had to date in the field of history (give specific courses), and why you decided to major in history.*

The most frequent reason cited for choosing to major in history was a long-standing love of the subject. Students sometimes identified positive experiences in the survey courses as a motivating factor for choosing to major in history. One student cited Dr. Joe Anderson's teaching in the survey as the main reason she chose to major in history. Dr. Anderson, unfortunately, chose to leave the University of West Georgia for a higher-paying position at another institution. Many of the students plan to teach history in high school following graduation.

2. *Looking back at your history course work to date, what have you learned about the nature of historical study? What themes or topics have been of most interest to you, and why? Try to support your general observations with specific illustrations drawn from specific courses.*

One of the more impressive answer to this question asserted that historical context is crucial to understanding any historical actor or source. The student wrote that "historical documents are to be

viewed through the mindset of [the] time.” This student correctly defined historiography. A second student wrote, “I have learned that many values and practices which I once believed were human nature actually came about as the result of wars, new ways of thinking, or other specific events.” Another student began his answer to this question as follows: “The nature of historical study is rooted in evidence.” This student, who had already taken several upper-level history courses, wrote that he has written a history research paper nearly every semester. Those research papers seem likely to have contributed to his understanding of how the discipline works. These answers reflect a well-developed ability to think historically.

One student explained that he had been troubled by the difficulty of objectivity in the historical discipline. Upon Dr. Pacholl’s suggestion, he read Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. I was impressed by the student’s curiosity and his initiative.

Military history remains a strong area of interest among students. One student credited Dr. Williams’s course on political history with awakening an interest in political history.

3. *Each of the following is a term that history students should know. Define each of them as specifically as possible.*

historiography

plagiarism

bias

The examinations *all* correctly defined plagiarism. Almost none of the exams correctly defined historiography. One student who correctly defined it already had taken several upper-level courses. The responses on historical significance, as well as the identifications indicate that the survey courses have trained most students fairly well in writing identifications.

4. *Write a brief essay on a historical question of your choosing. Some examples of historical questions are: Why were the American colonists successful in their war of independence from Great Britain? How did the Qing conquest of 1644 change Chinese administration? What was the greatest contribution to Arabic culture made by Mohammed? Do **not** write on one of those questions; come up with one of your own and answer it. Once again, try to be as specific as possible in your essay.*

Student answers on this question ranged widely in quality. It is apparent that some students did not take the question seriously. All of the students did expressly pose a historical question, and the overwhelming majority of the questions were good historical questions.

One student posed and answered effectively the question: Why was Reconstruction a failure? The student’s response drew on a course on the subject with Dr. Hebert, whom the student credited for sparking her interest in the subject of Reconstruction. Many of the questions posed dealt with African American history. The most impressive answer addressed the question: Why did surgeons in England increase in importance in the sixteenth century? The answer emphasized the role played by the Royal Society of Barber-Surgeons, which was founded during the period, in seeking to raise the prestige of the field. Another strong, well-organized essay considered the question: How was the Mongol Empire able to rule over most of Eurasia?

Papers: spring and summer 2009, Dr. Schroer

The sample of papers comprised four papers from each semester, including the paper receiving the lowest grade (75) and the highest grade (96) in the course on the assignment among papers submitted on time. The papers were read and scored on a score of 1 to 4 according the rubric below. I indicate the average score for the eight papers.

1. Does the paper offer a clear, persuasive thesis making a historical claim worth arguing about?

No	Poorly	Adequately	Absolutely
		3	

2. Does the paper cite its sources correctly?

No	Poorly	Adequately	Absolutely
			3.5

3. Does the paper sustain its thesis with evidence from the source?

No	Poorly	Adequately	Absolutely
		2.88	

4. Is the paper written clearly and persuasively?

No	Poorly	Adequately	Absolutely
		2.75	

5. Does the paper demonstrate an ability to think historically?

No	Poorly	Adequately	Absolutely
		2.88	

Two of the papers failed to adequately state a thesis, whereas two papers offered excellent, well-focused theses. The other four papers were adequate. The highest average score was in the students' ability to cite their sources correctly, which includes academic honesty and the distinctly less important matter of correctly formatting citations. The weakest area was in the quality of the writing. I believe that the relative strength of the papers in these areas is representative of history papers generally. Students' greatest weakness is often the quality of their writing. I spend considerable time on this in Methodology, but I still am often disappointed at the finished products in papers.

The best papers demonstrate an excellent ability to think historically. One student argues that the fact that that Dante's *Inferno* survived from the Middle Ages suggested that it found a wide readership. The favorable reception of the work in the period in turn suggested that Dante's ideas were shared by his readers. The student's recognition of the issue of the representativeness of the source bespeaks an ability to read historical evidence with care and sophistication. A less-developed ability to think historically was shown by another student using *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a source to understand the antebellum United States. The paper asserts, "While some people in this country considered slavery vital to the economy . . . , the majority thought the institution of slavery was wrong." The paper fails to offer convincing evidence for that judgment.

Methodology Assessment Report: Fall 2009 Dr. Vasconcellos

Assessment Exam:

At the start of the semester, I gave an assessment exam to ascertain the overall knowledge my students had with the various methods of historical inquiry and their familiarity with exactly what it is that we do as historians. The exam was comprised of 10 questions asking them to define plagiarism, discuss primary and secondary sources and provide examples for each, explain historical inquiry as they saw it, define what ingredients were necessary for a good book review, and the like. I also asked them to give a brief summary of themselves, which provided a brief bio, their decision to become a history major, how they planned to use that major, and to discuss their historical interests on a personal level.

About half of the class planned to graduate with a secondary teaching certification, a few were undecided as to exactly how they would use their degree, two wanted to go on to law school, and the rest stated that they would go on to obtain a Master's Degree and PhD in History after graduating from UWG. Outside of my two political science majors, each student had a clear understanding of exactly what it meant to be a historian: to preserve the past, to examine change over time, and to use the past to explain the present and plan for the future. Two students did not understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction, and half of the class was unclear as to what a primary source was and how it should be used. Many students knew what primary sources were, but they could not provide 5 examples of primary sources. The same was true for secondary sources. Many knew what they were, but they could not provide 3 examples of a secondary source, and most of the class did not agree that a novel could be used as a source. I clearly remember one student saying that a primary source was to be used first, and a secondary source was to be used second. Each student knew what plagiarism was, and they stated that citing sources was necessary in order to prevent it. However, there were mixed reviews as to whether paraphrasing was plagiarism, and it seems that most only believed that a direct quote without a proper citation was plagiarism. As for the book review question...that was the most interesting. Every student stated that a book review must discuss what the book was about, but very few students argued for a critical discussion. Two students did mention that a book review must place the book in a larger historiographical context, but the class' answers were quite vague overall.

Fall 2009 Methodology: Paper Writing Dr. Vasconcellos

In the primary source document summary, I asked students to choose a primary source from one of UWGs Library online databases, summarize the document in a two page paper, and they had to provide three citations: one paraphrase, one block quote, and one direct quote. Two students presented papers that were on secondary sources, despite the fact that I devoted an entire class to primary source documents before the paper's due date. One student utilized a whole page of the paper for a block quote, and a handful of students did not include paraphrased citations. A few students chose to analyze rather than summarize their documents, which was welcomed, and a few students provided a rather stale summary of their document in short, choppy sentences.

This leads me to a stylistic and grammatical assessment of the students in this Methodology class. I devoted a large part of the semester to grammatical and writing skills in the form of quizzes, lengthy comments on their grammatical mistakes and style, papers, and rewrite assignments. The class had three quizzes. The first quiz was a three page selection from an article with all commas removed, and students were asked to put them back in. The second quiz focused on the proper way to cite sources, and the third quiz centered on commonly misused and misunderstood words (their/there). Each student was required to rewrite two papers: their novel as a source paper and their book reviews. I found most rewrites came back with the bare minimum: meaning students would replace grammatical

mistakes but most did not expand on their analysis when asked. One student spent a great deal of the semester in the writing center, and the work paid off, earning him a significantly higher grade as a result.

In the novel as a source paper, about half of the class presented a literary criticism of the novel rather than an assessment on the validity and uses of historical fiction as a source, despite the fact that they were instructed not to do that. They simply did not understand the difference between literary and historical analysis. One student did not understand what fiction was and used a scholarly book instead. Another student wrote their novel paper on *The Hobbit*, and was quite upset when I gave them a failing grade on the basis that hobbits aren't real. Another student wrote theirs on the *War of the Worlds*, and focused on the public reaction that came after Orson Welles' original airing of that program. While this was an interesting paper, it was still not the assignment, but the rewrite was even more interesting when this student presented a fully re-written paper on the War of the Worlds being an allegory for foreign invasion by another world power. I was satisfied with that one, and I realized that they just didn't push themselves in the paper until forced to do so. The book reviews were about the same. Most students spent entirely too much time summarizing and less time reviewing. A few students, despite the fact that all books had to be pre-approved, turned in papers on books not published by a university press.

Senior Seminar

Reflective essays: Spring and Fall, 2009

Students in the course were required to write a reflective essay of 2-3 pages in length addressing the following question: What have you learned during your time as a student at West Georgia? The papers were graded and counted for 5 percent of the course grade.

The quality of the papers was quite high. Students seemed to value the opportunity to reflect on their experiences at West Georgia. Indeed, one student opened his paper by stating that he “enjoyed this exercise.” Several of the essays demonstrated a good sense of what the discipline of history is. Many of the students praised the department and individual faculty members for their teaching and their general commitment to students. Students remarked on the intellectual enthusiasm of department members, their accessibility, and their willingness to work with students to improve their skills. Some of the students also noted that they had to learn how to become better writers and more disciplined in their approach.

Several of the students explained that they had interrupted their studies for more than one semester. They often wrote that they were immature or unfocused in their first college experience, but returned more mature and focused. Many of the students emphasized that one of the most important skills they learned was “time management.” Many students emphasized learning that occurred outside of coursework, but which the broader experience at West Georgia directly produced.

In general, the writing was clearer and freer of errors than in the research papers. Students seem to have written the reflective essays in their own voice, which with them were more comfortable and more effective. The essays offered some confirmation of my belief that many problems in student writing stem from an effort to adopt an elevated style, which too often obscures what is meant. At the same time, since clarity in writing often indicates clarity in thought, the students may have been clearer in their thinking in the reflective essays than in their research papers. The essays seem to offer an especially clear, frank, and personal expression of the students’ views. Our students appear as a thoughtful and likeable group in their reflective essays. I encourage faculty members to read them.

One student in the Spring of 2009 criticized the department’s approach to advising, in addition to facing difficulty in finding a seat in Methodology. This was one of the very few criticisms of the department in the essays. His remarks bear quoting at length:

I suppose the only complaint I could raise over my experience at West Georgia is the advisement process, and obtaining a seat in methodology. I know it would be a strain on the department, but group advisement must be done away with! For many semesters, I felt I was walking in the dark trying to figure out what I needed to be taking to complete my major. The group advisement gives a general view, but does not specify one student’s [sic] needs in completing their course load.

There is some merit to this student’s view, although the current system in fact does not preclude individualized advisement. Indeed, many advisors spend hours each semester working individually with students. The workshops also allow for an advisor to work with those students who have more

individualized questions and problems. Another student did praise advising in the History Department highly, especially in contrast to advisement at another college. Several students also criticized the department's lack of courses in military history and in ancient history. This identified gap should be redressed by the fact that the department was finally allowed to fill the vacant position in ancient history, and the new faculty member hired is a military historian.

Papers

Spring 2009

Ability to cite sources properly

All papers in the course adhered to the principles of academic honesty.

Ability to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a particular historical question

On balance the papers showed good command of the facts pertaining to their historical questions.

Ability to recognize and to pose significant historical questions

Eight explicitly stated a clear, significant historical question. Two did not explicitly state a question, but one could be inferred from the paper. On balance the students were very strong in this area.

Ability to find useful primary and secondary sources

The students in the course were weaker in this area than I hoped, especially as they began their papers. Many of them made little effort to identify the most significant secondary sources in their area. Despite the instruction in Methodology that emphasizes that all secondary sources are not equally useful, many of the students showed little inclination to discriminate among secondary sources. There was too heavy a reliance on the holdings of Ingram Library. Several students likewise did not demonstrate great ability to locate or think creatively about primary sources.

The finished products amounted to good, but not excellent, performance in this area. Some students disregarded instruction to engage with particular sources.

Ability to analyze sources critically

Students showed some weakness in their ability to critically analyze sources. Some students accepted sources without questioning their accuracy.

Ability to write and to speak clearly

The writing of the papers is probably the greatest weakness of the papers. The papers' writing ranges in quality from excellent to awful. The oral presentations were noticeably improved over prior semesters. I believe they improved because during the first month in the course Tiffany Harris, an excellent former student, agreed to give her oral presentation from the course as a model for the students. Many of the students followed her model closely and gave strong oral presentations.

Ability to construct a persuasive historical argument based on evidence

Only one of the papers in the sample failed to articulate a thesis. That was the paper with the lowest grade in the course, and that student took Methodology before the course was reworked in spring 2006. All of the other papers in the sample stated a thesis and attempted to sustain it throughout the paper. On balance the papers were good. There were many cases in which the paper was not as tightly focused as it could have been. Some students seem to feel compelled to include material in their papers when they have done the research, regardless of its relevance to the paper's question.

Ability to think historically

On balance the papers were reasonably good. There was little anachronistic thinking or presentist moralizing in the papers. The papers were weak in contextualizing sources under discussion, but that skill is not easily developed. Nearly all of the papers attempted to place their arguments in historiographical context. The discussions of historiography were generally in need of greater focus on the precise question at hand.

Research Papers, Fall 2009

Ability to cite sources properly

All papers in the course adhered to the principles of academic honesty.

Ability to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a particular historical question

On balance the papers showed good command of the facts pertaining to their historical questions but some were not as thoroughly researched as they should have been. Several papers were based on a small number of secondary and primary sources and lacked factual development and substantiation.

Ability to recognize and to pose significant historical questions

Twelve explicitly stated a clear, significant historical question. Three stated a question but did not present a clear answer in the form of a thesis or did not seem to craft the paper around the answers to the questions. On balance the students were very strong in this area.

Ability to find useful primary and secondary sources

As with the students in the spring 2009 Senior Seminar, the students in the fall were weak in this area, especially as they began their papers. As in the spring, many of them made little effort to identify the most significant secondary sources in their area. Despite the instruction in Methodology that emphasizes that all secondary sources are not equally useful, many of the students showed little inclination to discriminate among secondary sources. There was too heavy a reliance on the holdings of Ingram Library. Several students likewise did not demonstrate great ability to locate or think creatively about primary sources. On the whole, the papers were weaker than I would like to see in the students' ability to use primary sources as the basis for their analysis of key points. They did not show skill in presenting primary sources as an evidentiary base for their arguments, but rather seemed to be trying simply to get them into the paper because it is a requirement. Several students had collected excellent examples of primary sources, but were weak in fleshing out all of the analytical insights that were there.

The finished products amounted to average performance in this area. Some students disregarded instruction to engage with particular sources.

Ability to analyze sources critically

Students showed some weakness in their ability to critically analyze sources. Some students accepted sources without questioning their accuracy. They were able to do this in their primary source oral presentations but did not incorporate such considerations into the papers.

Ability to write and to speak clearly

The writing of the papers is probably the greatest weakness of the papers. The papers' writing ranges in quality from excellent to awful. Several papers lacked solid conclusions. The oral presentations were well organized and showed in some cases greater clarity in organization than the actual papers.

Ability to construct a persuasive historical argument based on evidence

Overall the papers showed improved ability to state a thesis. All of the students attempted to construct an argument, but three of them were vague and overly general in their statement of thesis. On balance the papers were good, and most received praise from second readers. But the papers needed to be more cohesive in argumentation and to provide more factual substantiation for points. Several of the students did not seem to have tried very hard to find persuasive evidence to back and illustrate points. Several lost track of their argument in the course of the paper. As in the spring papers, some students included material in their papers regardless of its relevance to the paper's question. The papers also were weak in structure, in terms of breaking down an argument into a series of connected points that then are presented, analyzed, and substantiated.

Ability to think historically

I would repeat the assessment from the spring senior seminar papers. On balance the papers demonstrated a strong ability to think historically without moralizing or engaging in anachronistic thinking. The papers were weak in contextualizing sources under discussion, but that skill is not easily developed. All of the papers attempted to place their arguments in historiographical context, but only several of the students really seemed to get what this section is supposed to do. The discussions of historiography were generally in need of greater focus on the precise question at hand, and there needed to be more discussion of the existing points of view on the topic. Some of the students continued to consider the historiographical section as a description of the sources they planned to use, rather than a survey of the major scholarly works on the topic.

Recommendations

1. We should work to improve students' research skills. The Methodology course should continue to emphasize heavily the building of research skills. In addition, I believe students would benefit if more upper-level classes required research papers and offered some guidance in locating useful primary and secondary sources. The historiography course should emphasize that certain works are more influential than others and that students need to learn to identify the most important works in a field. Students also need more practice in analyzing primary sources and using these

as part of their substantiation for an argument. It may be useful to work in upper level classes on smaller document analysis papers that help students work towards a final research paper.

2. Student writing still needs work, although I see no easy solution to this weakness.
3. Continue to include model oral presentations in senior seminar. I hope that written models can be drawn from *Studies in Social Sciences* as it begins to publish student work.
4. The new historiography course should focus on the process of identifying important secondary sources, discerning their arguments, and synthesizing the state of the field in a particular area. Students have considerable room for improvement in these areas.
5. The following is a recommendation of Dr. Schroer:

The Department should consider assigning a particular faculty advisor to every student majoring in History. Every faculty member would have a group of advisees. This system would share the advising load equitably among faculty members. It would clarify that advising is part of the responsibilities of all faculty. Advisors could build stronger relationships with their advisees. I think that students' sense responsibility for their own education actually could be improved through a more individualized advisement process. All advisors should require students to bring to advisement a print-out of their Wolf Watch report showing what course work they have done and what remains to be done, along with a written proposed schedule of courses to be taken in the next semester. Advisors would obviously have more individual meetings with students, but the vast majority of those meetings would be focused and brief.

Dr. Elaine MacKinnon: I have a different recommendation. I disagree that assigning advisees to every faculty member is going to improve advising. I think that the existing system of workshop advising and with sub-group of advisors focused on this service can provide for individualized advising by making it clear to students that if they need or want to make individual appointments, they may, and many do. But the workshop system facilitates the process of advising and makes it more streamlined for students who are tracking their own progress and who do not need to schedule individualized sessions. It allows for students to hear repeated every semester the important steps in fulfilling the requirements of the major and important reminders concerning the language courses needed, methodology, etc. What can be done is to hold advising sessions at the Excel Center where students can each work individually on a computer and work out their schedule in conjunction with their Wolf Watch advising report, and make it mandatory that in order to be advised, a student must bring a copy of his or her Wolf Watch.