

Assessment Report for the Department of History
Covering Calendar Year 2006
Written by Timothy Schroer, Spring 2007

Introduction

This report describes the results of assessment instruments administered in HIST 2302 Methodology during the spring, summer, and fall terms of 2006, as well as the ACAT history test administered in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar during the spring and fall terms of 2006. This report is modeled closely on the History Department's 2005 Assessment Report. 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.

HIST 2302 Methodology

This course is intended to be taken by students in the last semester of their sophomore year or in the first semester of their junior year. It should be noted that students often take the course later in their program of studies than the Department might wish. The course is designed to prepare students to succeed as history majors in upper-level history courses and to teach them what historians do.

The course is intended for history majors, but each semester at least one Political Science student took the course because the Political Science and Planning Department requires its students to take lower-division courses in other social science disciplines.

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 borrow students' blue books from this exam from me if they want to read more.

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.

Students overwhelmingly cited interest in history as the main reason for choosing the major. Several students expressed confidence that they will make better high school history teachers than the teachers they had in high school. Some students cited positive experiences in survey courses as motivating them to major in history.

The majority of the students who took Methodology in 2006 had already taken some upper-level history courses. Students often find it difficult to take Methodology in the

second semester of their sophomore year or the first semester of their junior year because it fills up.

2. *You have been asked to write a five-page paper on Alexander Hamilton, Mohandas Gandhi, Evita Peron, or some other individual of your choice. Discuss how you would go about it. Where would you begin your research? Assuming that a general biography is wanted, what questions would you attempt to answer in your brief essay?*

Several students understood that historical study begins with a question. One student wrote that her “first move would be to decide what questions about the individual I wanted to answer.” Another wrote, “I would first go to my notes and my textbooks to help me formulate a question on which to write my essay.”

3. *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.*

Students showed a clear understanding that the historical discipline depends on research in primary and secondary sources.

I think students’ understanding of the discipline moves through recognizable stages.¹ Student responses to this question suggest that nearly all of our students have advanced beyond the most basic conception of the historical discipline. This first stage has been called the “banking model,” according to which teachers have knowledge of a discrete number of facts that they deposit into the heads of students. Several students described their experience at West Georgia of moving beyond the first stage. One student wrote, “I feel like my whole high school career has been a lie in not teaching the in’s and out’s of history.”

Most of our students seem to be at stage two, where they see that history is more than a collection of equally meaningful, interesting, and knowable facts. The discipline concerns itself with answering historical questions on the basis of evidence. Answers or interpretations are often contested. Students at this stage often express the view that it is impossible to determine whether one interpretation is better than any other. History, for them, is a matter of opinion. One student, for example, wrote that all the themes addressed in the Methodology course “can be lumped into one idea, relativism.” The study of history is “intriguing and horrifying” in this student’s view, because of “how relative it is.” A disappointingly high number of students remain at this second stage near the end of the Methodology course, despite our efforts.

¹ My thinking on how students understand the nature of the historical discipline has been informed by the work of William Perry and Blythe McVicker Clinchy, as described in Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 42-46.

Some students have reached a higher, third stage, characterized as procedural knowing. They see that all interpretations are not equally valid. Some interpretations better answer the question on the basis of available evidence than others and the discipline offers rules by which to judge the validity of interpretations.

Some of our students reach this stage. One student, for example, wrote that in doing his first research paper here he became excited to learn that history was more than “simply reciting an ‘age old story of our past.’” That same student described his excitement at learning how to read cultural products such as Superman comics historically. That is, how were the comics shaped by their historical context and what do they tell us about the culture in which they were produced? He further wrote that he has enjoyed research papers more than any other aspect of his studies at West Georgia. (He is now working on a promising paper for Senior Seminar based on archival research in Georgia and Tennessee.) This student seems to me to have reached a high level of understanding of the discipline through his study at West Georgia.

There is evidence that in other respects our students are learning from their studies at West Georgia. Some students wrote that they have gained a sense of the interconnectedness of societies in history through their studies. One student cited the example of the Irish Potato Famine having produced mass migration to the United States, “which in turn influenced politics of the day.” Here the department is meeting part of its mission.

Some students described experiences in which their study of history challenged previously-held beliefs. History, one student wrote, “can be boring at times but is very exciting when you come across something that challenges the way you have viewed some aspect of the past.”

Students generally seem most interested in history for what it can tell them about themselves. One student wrote, “I have learned that history is the looking back at past events, in order to help us understand ourselves today.” Many students expressed a strong interest in religious history and a large number of students expressed Christian belief.

4. *Each of the following is a term that history students might encounter in their course of study. Define as specifically as possible two of them.*

historiography

plagiarism

historical significance

bias

Students generally have a clear understanding of the meaning of these terms.

5. *Identify two individuals, events, or documents that you regard as being historically significant and explain why.*

Students generally did a very good job identifying historically significant events and explaining their significance. Among the items they identified were: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Henry Ford, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., the U.S. Civil War, the New Deal, Adolf Hitler, Confucius, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, Jesus, Ronald Reagan, George Washington, and the Civil Rights movement.

6. *Write a brief essay on a historical question of your choosing (e.g., 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?). Once again, try to be as specific as possible in your essay.*

I was generally impressed with the framing of questions by students and generally less impressed by their grasp of the specifics of the answers to the questions. The teaching of our students to frame productive and important questions strikes me as a significant achievement. Some of the questions posed were: “How did Chinese Immigration [sic] in the early twentieth century effect [sic] American society?” “How did slave owners justify the existence of the institution of slavery?” “What changes did the Industrial Revolution bring for rural families?”

Sometimes students appeared to be heading in the direction of asking excellent questions, but did not quite frame the question effectively. For example, one student proposed, in somewhat garbled terms, examining the classic question of the social origins of the French Revolution: “Were the Bourgeoisie [sic] in pre-Revolutionary France wanting to develop their own ‘class’ within the three estates or assemblate [sic] into the First [sic] Estate.” The student persuasively argued that, although there was an emerging sense of bourgeois distinctiveness in France before 1789, the upheaval was not caused by a newly assertive bourgeoisie making claims as a revolutionary class.

Many students did not come up with their own question but addressed one of the examples cited in the question, most commonly: “Why were the American colonists successful in their war of independence from Great Britain?” Some students did not explicitly pose a question but composed a solid essay advancing a thesis about the past.

Some answers stood out as showing sophistication and good grasp of the specifics of historical developments. One student wrote on “Why was Elvis Presley such a success among teenagers in the 1950s?” The essay used that question to reflect more broadly on race relations and the growth of youth culture in increasingly affluent U.S. society. Another student posed the question that he planned to address in his Senior Seminar paper.

Often questions reflected the individual’s personal history or interest: “Why was General Robert E. Lee so admired and inspiring to so many people in the South during and after the war?” “Why was the island state of Hawaii pulled out of anarchism and into the United States?”

HIST 4484 Senior Seminar

This course is intended to be taken by students during their senior year. It provides students with the opportunity to conceive and execute their own original historical study. It represents the capstone of the history major’s course of study at the University of West Georgia.

Each semester students in HIST 4484 take the ACAT history exam as an assessment instrument in order to test their knowledge of European and U.S. history. Students are informed that they must take the assessment exam, but it will not be graded. The examination is a multiple-choice examination. It tends to treat all facts in history as equal and some of the questions address matters that I regard as insignificant.

The examination had at least two errors. One multiple-choice question asked students to identify which of four listed people served as British Prime Minister during World War II. Both Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill were listed, and in fact both served as British Prime Minister during World War II. A student pointed out the error to me after the examination. I noticed that in the examination Adolf Hitler was misspelled as “Adolf Hitter.”

In Spring 2006, 19 students (10 female and 9 male) took the exam. Fourteen of the students were planning graduate studies and 11 were transfers. Individual overall scores ranged from the 95th percentile to the 3rd percentile. The aggregate results were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
U.S. 1820 to 1890	496	48
U.S. 1890 to 1940	481	42
U.S. 1763 to 1820	466	37
European Early Modern	469	38
European Medieval	469	38
European Modern - Present	479	42
OVERALL	463	36

In Fall 2006 14 students (5 female, 8 male, and one undisclosed) took the exam. Six were transfers and six were planning graduate students. Individual overall scores ranged from one student in the 99th percentile to one student in the 10th percentile. The aggregate results for Fall 2006 were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
U.S. 1820 to 1890	504	52

U.S. 1890 to 1940	528	61
U.S. 1763 to 1820	514	56
European Early Modern	502	51
European Medieval	537	64
European Modern - Present	516	56
OVERALL	517	57

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Department may want to consider offering an additional section of Methodology each year so that more students can take the course at the desired stage in their studies.

I believe that the Department should consider adopting a new assessment instrument for students in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar. The ACAT examination is a very limited test. Its most serious flaw is that it poorly tests what we want our students to know. The 2005 Assessment Report concluded with the statement, “If we wish to get a better idea of what majors do know, or how students have applied critical thinking and other skills we emphasize in our mission statement, we need to figure out a better way to assess our majors.” I agree.