

Assessment Report for the Department of History
Covering Calendar Year 2007
Timothy Schroer, Spring 2008

Introduction

This report describes the results of assessment instruments administered in HIST 2302 Methodology during the spring, summer, and fall terms of 2007, as well as the ACAT history test administered in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar during the spring and fall terms of 2007. 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.

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. *Unlike in 2006, the examination in 2007 was administered at the very beginning of the semester rather than toward the end of the semester.* I think that as a result, students did noticeably worse on the examination in 2007 than they did in 2006. 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.

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 majority of the students who took Methodology in 2007 had already taken some upper-level history courses. The two sections of Methodology in fall 2008 should help more students take the course earlier in their career.

Students most frequently wrote that they decided to major in history because it is interesting. Most of our students intend to teach history in the high schools. Several of them credited high school teachers with sparking an interest in the discipline. Some wrote that they decided to major in history after enjoying their history survey courses. One student wrote that professors Hebert and Leslie inspired her to try to become a history teacher. One student, who recently died in an auto accident, wrote that he became interested in ancient history because of Dr. Stephens's excellent teaching.

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?*

The answers to this question were fairly superficial. Most stated they would begin research in the library and would supplement that research with internet research. One student did note that it was necessary to narrow one's focus to a manageable scope, without making the focus so narrow that it was impossible to find sufficient sources. A few students noted that they would seek primary sources.

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.*

Several students expressed interest in ancient Roman and Greek history. The history of the United States from colonization through the Civil War is popular. Many students identified military history as a favorite. A few students also listed British history, especially the Tudor period, as a favorite subject.

I think students' understanding of the discipline moves through recognizable stages.¹ Student responses to this question suggest that some of our students have advanced beyond the most basic conception of the historical discipline by the beginning of Methodology. 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. Some students come out of the surveys and still have this vision of history. One student wrote, "Studying history is fairly simple because history never changes." (He ended up doing poorly in the course.) Several students wrote that their study of history in college was very different from the way history was taught in high school because in college they focused not only on what happened when, but *why* it happened. Some described their experience at West Georgia of moving beyond the first stage.

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 of the students (generally those who have had some upper-level history courses) 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. This view was exemplified by a student who described writing a paper addressing the question of how the battle of Adrianople shaped the Roman Empire's fall. He found that six different historians had six different views on the question, and he could not definitively answer the question. Another student wrote, "The main point that I have learned is that history is in many ways subjective."

A few students have reached a higher, third stage, characterized as procedural knowing, by the beginning of Methodology. One wrote that "in history your project is only as good as your argument and your argument is only as good as your research."

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 plagiarism and bias. Few defined historiography or historical significance, and no one satisfactorily defined historiography at the beginning of Methodology.

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

Students generally did a good job identifying historically significant events and explaining their significance. Among those identified were: Jesus, George Washington, the American Revolution, and the Declaration of Independence.

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.*

Many students did not articulate a good historical question of their own, but answered the example question about American independence. Among the poor questions posed were: "Who was the greatest baseball player of all time?" "Was Jesus Christ really God in the flesh or just a prophet?" (The essay came to no conclusion.)

Some students asked better questions. Among them were: Why were atomic weapons used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How did Hitler come to power? Why did the slave system boom after the discovery of the New World? “What was so revolutionary about the French Revolution?” Some answers were good. A student who examined how the New Deal was received by Americans noted the diversity of opinion among the public on the Roosevelt administration’s programs. One student sought to answer the question: “Why is military history important?” He noted that primary sources on military history questions are abundant, reflecting the judgment of past authors that military questions were important. He argued persuasively that the exercise of military force frequently has produced significant historical change.

HIST 4484 Senior Seminar

This course is 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.

In spring 2007, 21 students took the exam. Twelve of the students were planning graduate studies and five were transfers. Individual overall scores ranged from the 5th percentile to the 99th percentile. (The student scoring in the 99th percentile is currently pursuing an M.A. in history at San Diego State University and has emailed me that he did well in his first semester.) The aggregate results were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
U.S. 1820 to 1890	506	52
U.S. 1890 to 1940	483	43
U.S. 1763 to 1820	467	37
European Early Modern	470	38
European Medieval	451	31
European Modern - Present	498	49
OVERALL	461	35

In fall 2007, 19 students took the exam. Nine were transfers and eleven were planning graduate study. Individual overall scores ranged from one student in the 2nd percentile to one student in the 92nd percentile. (The student scoring in the 92nd percentile is currently pursuing an M.A. in history at West Georgia.) The aggregate results for fall 2007 were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
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U.S. 1820 to 1890	503	51
U.S. 1890 to 1940	470	38
U.S. 1763 to 1820	491	46
European Early Modern	475	40
European Medieval	477	41
European Modern - Present	499	50
OVERALL	470	38

Conclusion and Recommendations

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." Last year I recommended that the department consider adopting a new assessment instrument for students in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar. Since that last assessment report, I have done some preliminary reading about assessing student learning in the historical discipline and attended a panel at the AHA meeting that addressed the issue. I have not found a good alternative to the ACAT available. Devising an effective assessment instrument is a difficult and demanding task. I propose that if the department establishes an Undergraduate Studies Committee starting next year, it should consider the possibilities for improving assessment of history majors.