

Decennial Review of the Department of History University of Washington

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Summary of Process

In December 2001 the Graduate School formed a committee to conduct the decennial review of the Department of History. Professor Gary Handwerk, Departments of English and Comparative Literature, Professor Katharyne Mitchell, Department of Geography, and Professor Richard Startz (committee chair), Department of Economics, served as internal University of Washington members. Professor John Merriman, Department of History, Yale University and Professor Barbara Metcalf, Department of History, University of California, Davis served as external committee members. Dr. Heidi Tilghman, Assistant to the Dean, The Graduate School coordinated the review and the activities of the committee.

On April 10, the internal committee members attended a charge meeting with Dean Marsha Landolt, Dean Susan Jeffords, Dean George Bridges, Associate Provost Debra Friedman, Associate Dean John Slattery and guests. The committee was provided subsequently with the extensive self-study prepared by the Department of History as part of the review process. Subsequent to the charge meeting, the internal members of the committee met with History Chair Professor Robert Stacey. The committee issued invitations to faculty, staff, graduate, and undergraduate students to contact the committee by email and to meet with the entire committee in groups during the site visit. (Internal members of the committee also offered to meet with individuals prior to the site visit.) The committee received emails from two individuals and met privately with one. During the site visit on May 13 and 14, the entire committee met with faculty organized by rank and by area, with the staff, and with both graduate and undergraduate students. Specifically, the Review Committee interviewed Robert Stacey, Chair of the Department of History, James Felak, Director of Graduate Studies, and Robin Stacey, Director of Undergraduate Studies, as well as Cheryl Fisk, departmental Administrator, Susanne Young, Director of Academic Services, and Moran Tompkins, Senior Counselor for Undergraduate Studies. We met with the faculty and staff affiliated with the Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest. We also met separately with full Professors, Associate Professors, and Assistant Professors, and then met separately with faculty of all ranks grouped by geographic interest: Europeanists, Asianists, Americanists, and those classifying themselves as Comparative Historians. In all, we were able to meet with thirty of the department's forty-two historians, including all ten assistant professors, eight of the ten associate professors, and twelve of the twenty-two full professors. The committee also met approximately half a dozen graduate and separately half a dozen undergraduate students, with no departmental representatives present.

At the conclusion of the site visit the committee met with Department Chair Stacey and UW administration members (Deans Hodge, Jeffords, Landolt, and Bridges and Associate Provost Friedman).

Overview

We unanimously, and without the least hesitation, recommend the continuation of the department's degree programs.

The History Department is a strong academic unit, contributing to both the research and teaching missions of the University. It has successful internal governance mechanisms, good relations with other units in the University, and has been a good steward of the resources made available to it.

The Department's strengths notwithstanding, we take it as central to our task to point to a number of particular problems affecting the department that must be addressed. We note that the next few years, during which as many as ten retirements can be anticipated, will be a crucial period for the department as it plans its priorities and future.

The Department of History at the University of Washington presents some considerable strengths; the department has achieved international prominence, above all, in the Asian field (in conjunction with the Jackson School of International Affairs), as well as in the Medieval field and in the study of the Pacific Northwest. The disproportionate number of impending retirements in Asian history, the department's "crown jewel," make it even more essential for the department to emphasize this field and to retain its international visibility.

The department is not now nor probably will ever be ranked with well-funded private universities, or with the flagship Berkeley campus within the University of California university system. Institutional constraints on salaries and graduate school funding without question are daunting obstacles to such a goal, posing severe limitations on the Department of History (as well as on other departments). Salaries of full professors lag 34.8% behind comparable institutions, and those of the associate professors trail by 20.1%, a situation that was accurately described in interviews as "extremely corrosive to faculty morale." While we recommend that some hiring be done of more senior scholars of international reputation, we recognize that most new faculty will be junior appointments. This situation makes more critical the hiring and retention of first-rate younger scholars upon whom the department's future will largely ride. In our view, the University of Washington's History Department should seek to compete with its counterparts in some of the finest public state universities, such as the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of North Carolina. It is already recognized as very good overall and excellent in selected fields. Although graduate applications have declined (following a nation-wide trend), the department has continued to attract good graduate students of constant quality over the past decade. While several faculty members noted that they had lost students whom they had hoped to attract to the department to more well-funded and higher profile departments, about half of applicants admitted into the program accept the chance to come. Moreover, the department's record of placing graduate students in positions, including tenure-track positions, looks very good indeed - this has a lot to do with creating a favorable reputation for department. Graduate students seemed genuinely satisfied with the mentoring they have received in the department. The departmental average for completion of the Ph.D. (8.6 years) strikes us as too high, excepting those fields where students must master multiple languages. Slow progress in part reflects the lack of sufficient financial support for graduate students and thus the fact that many graduate students must continue to work.

Despite a decline in majors (corresponding to a national trend) and a lack of teaching assistants that can only be considered disastrous (and which will be described further below), the department's undergraduate enrollments remain high and the undergraduate students whom we met were effusive in their expression of appreciation for the teaching ability of members of the department. Recent departmental reforms of undergraduate teaching appear extremely promising. We do not agree with the contention that the department ranks fairly low among social science departments in the ratio of students taught per faculty member. The lack of classrooms of sufficient size remains a chronic problem, although the shift to more afternoon teaching should improve the situation. We would encourage broader participation of the faculty in the departmental honors program.

Departmental faculty as a group should be commended for their generally cheerful and efficient participation in departmental and university committee work. The burden of this work can be described as "reasonable." The department has in general been very effectively chaired (with some suggestions to follow). It is also for the most part effectively staffed, despite complaints about salaries (one staff member noted that the department is an "absolutely wonderful place to work") and the lack of space for offices and storage. We were also in general impressed with the department's collegiality and left with the strong sense that it forms for the most part an intellectual community. The department has succeeded in winning a number of outside grants, including one for two million dollars from the Freeman Foundation to enhance the undergraduate curriculum in the Asian field, and seems both determined to pursue additional grants and optimistic that more can be obtained. In addition, the department has been successful in fund-raising and, here too, its determination to do more reflects good departmental morale.

We were particularly impressed with the academic accomplishments, dynamism, resourcefulness, commitment to research and teaching, and collegiality of what appears to be a remarkable cohort of assistant professors. Their presence offers exciting possibilities for the future, provided they can be retained, lest the department become, like the English Department, something of a "farm team for other universities." We note that the program of "buy-outs" from teaching courses for a quarter have provided them with quarter-leaves for their research, writing, and the development of new courses-this wise policy has in our view generated demonstrable positive results, including publications and book contracts with major university presses, an excellent record of obtaining research funding, and energetic initiation of and participation in collaborative research, teaching, and public service projects. Thus, one assistant professor spoke for the others when assessing the department of History at the University of Washington as being "a very good place to be for a junior person."

The associate professors are, although with individual exceptions, a less happy group. This group has suffered from the University's salary policies, in particular, inadequate pay for continuing faculty. This group also suffers from a lack of the opportunities for research support which the University makes available to newer cohorts. The associate professors bear a heavy portion of the department's teaching load. This group should be encouraged to seek research quarters and to participate in competitions from the Simpson Center and the RRF. Where appropriate, the Department should plan teaching and service responsibilities at a level and according to a schedule that will increase the research productivity of the associate professors.

Recent appointments in History have considerably increased the number of women and minorities, here again demonstrating that the department acted on recommendations made during the last review ten years ago. In our view, then, the department of History should build on existing strengths. The department stands at the center of essential intellectual and institutional connections (Art History, Jackson School, Anthropology, Geography, American Ethnic Studies and, within the Humanities, the English Department) as reflected in numerous collaborations, new courses, and a variety of intellectual research projects. However, it should also be noted that losses among promising junior faculty in other departments, notably English, the Art History, and in the languages have undercut such efforts, and are likely to continue to do so. The History Department has done a good job in aggressively pursuing collaborative research and teaching opportunities across the campus.

We wish to emphasize that without the presence of historians in major areas, the University of Washington will lose its current enviable record at securing Title VI funding.

We were pleased to find a high degree of collegiality within the department, despite an unmistakable level of demoralization about salaries and graduate school funding. The "History Research Group" is in its thirty-fifth year of monthly meetings to discuss faculty papers, a group that has involves up to half of the members of the department at any given meeting. Moreover, we are impressed with both the faculty's dedication and their success in undergraduate teaching. Following recommendations ten years ago, the department has made a number of changes in intellectual and curricular directions that have been extremely positive.

The department has moved cautiously but confidently toward combining thematic and chronological approaches to the study, teaching, and writing of history. Recent appointments have built upon progress already made in shaping thematic emphases, above all in gender, comparative colonialism and empire, comparative slavery, race and ethnicity, and comparative labor history, but also in such areas as history and memory, nature and culture, and the comparative history of ideas. These new thematic directions and area approaches are in no way contradictory, but rather complementary, and should allow the department to maintain and further develop existing strengths. These themes are well-established and important topics within the discipline of history, reflecting trends in the discipline as a whole, and they are, in many cases, central to the nodal role the department plays in intellectual collaborations across the humanities and social sciences at the University of Washington.

Future Planning

We strongly recommend that the department update its strategic plan for future hiring since at this point there is no explicitly agreed on list of priorities. This is important for two reasons. First, the University of Washington appears to be supportive of partner/special opportunity hires. While most members of the department recognize the value of this policy to the campus as a whole as well as to their own department, there is some feeling that they no longer control the shape of the department. With an agreed on statement of their overall strategies and a list of priority hires, they will be better able to assess special opportunity hires offered to them. They should be less likely to turn down proposals out of hand, yet they will also have more clarity about positions that may not serve them well. The department needs reassurance from the administration that – as the review committee was told – they can reasonably expect that positions vacated through resignation or retirement will return to them. A second reason for hammering out hiring priorities at this point is that this is a moment of unusual opportunities given the prospect of as many as ten retirements in the next few years.

It is clear that the department has been informally giving a great deal of thought to recent losses and impending retirements, and the review committee supports what seems to be their overall emphasis. Now, it is important that the process be formalized in order to meet the challenges that lie ahead. In particular, we would like to underline the importance of maintaining traditional strength in Asian history. The immediate needs are South Asia, Korea, and Japan and the long unfilled goal of bringing to the University a scholar working on the modern Middle East. A second visible need is to maintain chronological depth across geographic areas. In the European field, for example, a glaring gap is the coverage of the eighteenth century, including the Ancien Régime and the Enlightenment. The department is committed in these hires to continue to build on the excellent progress already made in shaping thematic emphases.

The department also needs to work with the administration in shaping a plan for the level at which hires are to be made. Although recent hires have been primarily at the junior level, the addition of three distinguished faculty members at the senior level has clearly been significant in shaping the department's profile. These hires support key departmental emphases in Asia, women's history, and American ethnicity. They make it easier to hire outstanding junior colleagues who will want to be associated with such leaders in the field; they also attract good graduate students. Ideally, in looking ahead over the next five years, the department will be able to continue to make at least a few appointments of people at a senior level.

Resources

The committee, in particular the two external reviewers, finds the level of salary in the Department of History appalling; this department is simply not in a competitive position against comparable departments across the country. It is very impressive that the department functions as well as it does, given the lack of resources and certain inequities built into the way those resources are used. But the situation clearly contributes to considerable demoralization among the associate professors and to significant anxiety among the assistant professors about their future prospects. In our view, it is very important that the salaries of the assistant professors not be allowed to languish as have those of tenured faculty in the past.

Despite the centrality of the salary issue, the most persistent resource problem noted by faculty throughout our interviews was the inadequate level of funding available for graduate students. This, too, affects the department's national visibility and job placement record. The lack of stable, guaranteed TA support threatens both the long-term viability of the graduate program and the strength of the department's undergraduate teaching. By comparison with other social science units and other departments nationally, the number of TA lines with respect to faculty numbers and enrollments is surprisingly low. This hinders the department's recruitment and retention of graduate students and impedes their progress through the program. This was already a major problem ten years ago, at the time of the last departmental review, underscored with considerable documentation by then-chair Richard Johnson. At present, the situation is hindering the revitalization of the undergraduate curriculum, making it particularly difficult for the assistant professors (and others) to develop and teach new large-size undergraduate courses, despite their clearly evident interest in doing so.

Addressing this problem will require a thoughtful combination of new institutional resources and the creative management of existing resources. The committee recommends the addition of a significant number of TA lines, and that these new lines be specifically targeted toward areas of curricular innovation. It also suggests that a large proportion of funds (recapture and other money) currently devoted to supporting short-term lecturer appointments be converted into TA lines and that the department seriously consider transferring one or more GSA lines currently in the advising office into teaching lines. Money spent on TA's is the most cost-effective and critical contribution that the administration can make toward strengthening the department overall in terms of research and teaching. Related to this, we recommend the gradual commitment of a significant number of TA lines (along with fellowship money) into five-year packages, in order to help recruit new graduate students. Unless this is done, the department is likely to face continually increasing difficulty in attracting top applicants to its program.

Curriculum and Enrollments

The department is to be commended for the dramatic work it has done recently in revising its undergraduate curriculum. The planning documents related to this area of the department are among the most impressive documents presented in the self-study; they show a department that has been working collaboratively and effectively to redefine its entire curriculum in order to make it mesh more fully with newly articulated student learning objectives. The success of these

reforms is impossible to measure at this point, since most changes are going into effect this year or next. It will be highly important that the department monitor these changes over the next several years in order to determine whether they really do improve undergraduate education and resolve the perceived problems they were intended to address. The undergraduate curriculum does remain, as one department member noted, somewhat “schizophrenic” in its mix of large lecture courses and very small seminars, with very few courses in between.

Despite the wide-spread perception that overall enrollments in History are quite low compared to other Social Science units, it is not clear by the statistical data presented to us that this is indeed the case. Compared to ten years ago, figures are lower for the number of majors, undergraduate degrees awarded, and student credit hours (SCH) taught by the department, and the ratio of undergraduate paid SCH's per regular (tenure-track) faculty member is considerably below numbers for the social sciences overall. But the ratio of SCH's per total faculty member is very close to the average in the social sciences and the department has clearly made progress in the last few years in stemming and even in reversing the overall decline. Moreover, these data for history correspond favorably with humanities departments such as English, with whom History might also be compared. The retirement of Jon Bridgman has clearly been a factor in enrollment numbers, as has the department's ongoing commitment to teaching writing in most of its courses (with a significant effect upon faculty/student and TA/student ratios). The department is, however, actively considering ways of boosting enrollment in some specific ways and should be encouraged to continue to do so—but not at the price of sacrificing its commitment to specific pedagogical objectives such as the teaching of writing or research skills to its students.

Governance

The general atmosphere of the department is congenial. It is a department that functions well and where there are few internal divisions or long-standing enmities which might otherwise disrupt the internal flow of communication. Most faculty expressed satisfaction with the structure of leadership, believing it to be conducive to the democratic process. And most also felt that the appropriate amounts of time were spent on deliberations over departmental issues. Aside from the strong concerns about salary, faculty morale seems reasonably high.

This said, there was also a strong sentiment that the department might function better and more equitably if some responsibilities were devolved from the position of the chair to an advisory committee and, in some cases, to faculty committees. The current chair suggested the possibility of establishing an associate chair position to help with workload, but the faculty preferred the idea of a stronger advisory committee, and the reviewers concur with this position. The advisory committee should meet and aid in the governance of the department on a weekly or bi-monthly basis, and have members elected from all three ranks. This would serve the dual purpose of reducing the chair's overwhelming workload, and also rendering decision-making more transparent.

In several areas faculty raised the issue of "lack of transparency." While there was general satisfaction with departmental governance, we noted a number of areas in which there seemed to be miscommunication as to departmental policies. Some of these seem to reflect more lack of information than disagreement with decisions taken. While we have some suggestions for greater committee structure, whatever mechanism is adopted should bear in mind the need for greater communication amongst a very large faculty as much as the need for a decision-making mechanism.

Several faculty would like to see more transparency vis-à-vis the allocation of teaching assignments. One possibility would be the establishment of area groups for curriculum planning and scheduling. These groups (e.g. the Asianists, Europeanists, etc.) would be responsible for meeting as a committee every spring, and ensuring that the core courses for their field would be covered the following year. Coverage for course buyouts, sabbatical leaves, research quarters, etc. would be a process of negotiation over timing and general course scheduling that could be on a longer term basis than the yearly decision-making by the chair. It would also be an internally negotiated process that would help dispel the anxieties some faculty feel about teaching allocations within the department. Perhaps most beneficially, it would release the chair from the onerous task of curriculum planning, although the final decisions would rest with him.

Two particular areas of concern about teaching assignments stood out. First, there appears to be widespread support – including from the undergraduates with whom we spoke – for offering more courses off the "five-day-a-week" format. Second, criteria for approving research quarters are currently unclear. The committee strongly recommends that the use of research quarters be actively encouraged, consistent with the obligation of the department as a whole to meet its curricular and scheduling needs.

There is a need for a clearer understanding of the arrangement for course "buyouts." There is some feeling that current arrangements consist of "special deals," although we found no evidence to support this feeling. Nonetheless such beliefs can be corrosive and are best dealt with by erring

on the side of making both principles and outcomes as public as possible. Similarly, there was some concern with understanding how moneys from private fundraising are allocated.

There is a lack of communication between the Department and the College, most specifically the College Council, as to the standard for promotion to full professor. It should be made more clear to what extent a second book is necessary and what evidence of publication the College Council requires. In the view of the outside committee members, the basic requirement of a second book is sound. Preferably a second book should be published by the time of promotion, but at the least there should be evidence that the manuscript is close to publication. A contract based on the reading of the manuscript by outside readers would, for example, be something that would indicate that publication is fairly near. The College should, however, allow for the possibility of exceptions, for example for a number of path breaking articles or other work of great, recognized importance. But in most cases, a second book with a manuscript vetted by outside readers should be a key requirement.

Assignments of teaching assistants should be a faculty, not staff, function. Further, there is concern both that the process of assignment of TAs is not transparent and that it is overly guided by precedent rather than current and future needs of the department.

Faculty also raised a difficult issue concerning the burden of the position of Director of Graduate Studies. This position is generally held by a faculty member at the rank of associate professor. Although the associate professors were strongly attracted by the financial incentive for holding this position (the equivalent of one month's salary), the review committee felt that the time entailed in this directorship had caused numerous associates to become stalled in their forward progress to the rank of full. The committee, however, is loathe to recommend that this position only be held by full professors, given the desperately low salaries for many associates, who have been caught by the hot housing market and rapidly rising prices of the last decade--something not generally felt to the same degree by the full professors. Perhaps this position should be rotated on a one to two year basis rather than 3-5 years, or some of the associated duties should be devolved to a committee.

Consideration should be given to rotating the directorship of the honors program more regularly to encourage broader participation in the honors program by faculty. (To be clear, the recommendation is for the principle of rotation; we heard no complaints about recent leadership.) The honors program, more generally, should be rendered transparent to the assistant professors, who felt unclear about the logistics, leadership and general practices of the program.

Staffing Issues

The Department of History is fortunate to have an experienced, hard-working staff. Changes in the educational and University environment argue for a re-organization to more closely match the department's current needs

The department needs a senior technical support person. This person should have responsibility for the technical infrastructure (but not the content) of the department web site. In addition, this person should be responsible for overall maintenance of hardware and software in the department and should serve as a technical liaison with the College technical staff. Training of faculty on educational technology should be provided as requested.

The department needs a fiscal specialist to handle the increased workload due both to increased grant activity and the increasing tendency of the central administration to devolve accounting responsibilities to departments. In addition, the department should investigate whether it could usefully adopt the "shadow budget" database technologies developed in other social science departments.

We recommend elsewhere that some of the graduate student positions now assigned to advising be redeployed as teaching assistants. To partially offset this, we recommend that the department bring the advising section of the web site up-to-date, hold group advising meetings, and consider the use of peer advisors.

Recommendations

Recommendations to the University

1. All degree programs should be continued. We hold the History Department's contribution to the educational mission of the University in the highest regard.
2. Faculty salaries should be increased.
3. The department should be permitted to continue its mission of renewal by hiring new faculty. Special care should be taken to preserve the department's traditional strength in Asian history, while also making needed strategic hires in other areas. Some portion of the new hires should be at the tenured level.
4. The number of permanent TA positions should be increased.
5. The College Council should clarify its standard for promotion to full professor in regard to promotions in history.
6. The University should encourage coordination in hiring between History and cognate units, particularly the Jackson School, where appropriate.
7. The University should facilitate re-organization of the staff.
8. Support should be given to the department's efforts at private fundraising.

Recommendations to the Department

1. A greater portion of graduate student support should be offered in the form of long-term packages to facilitate recruiting the best graduate students.
2. The department should update its hiring plan to articulate priorities over the next five years.
3. The departmental Advisory Committee should meet regularly.
4. Given the large number of faculty, a committee structure should be established to facilitate policy discussion and decision-making supplementary to departmental faculty meetings. As an initial mechanism, meetings of faculty by area might be held to handle course scheduling.
5. The department staff should be reconfigured to meet current needs. A senior computer specialist and a fiscal specialist are top priorities.
6. One or more graduate student positions in advising should be redeployed as teaching assistant positions.
7. One or more temporary lecturer positions should be redeployed as teaching assistant positions.
8. Teaching schedules should be arranged to permit research quarters whenever possible, subject to the overall teaching needs of the department.

9. The number of classes meeting other than on a five-day-a-week schedule should be increased.
10. Consideration should be given to whether distinct sections of History of the Pacific Northwest course should be established: one oriented toward undergraduate majors and one oriented toward teachers seeking certification.
11. The process for deciding which courses receive teaching assistants should be made more transparent and attention should be given to allocating teaching assistants to new courses.
12. More faculty, particularly junior faculty, should be involved in the honors program.
13. The department web site should be brought up-to-date.
14. Consideration should be given to graduate student issues including: whether four fields is an appropriate number for the PhD; greater transparency with regard to rules for ongoing TA support; scheduling of graduate courses across the year within given areas of specialization; increased career preparation, especially for those following nonacademic trajectories.

Summary

The Department of History is to be congratulated on the continued growth of a successful academic program. Despite the University's financial situation, we recommend the University increase its strategic investment to assure the Department's future.