

Assessment Report for the Department of History
Covering the Calendar Year 2008
Timothy Schroer, Spring 2009

Introduction

This report describes the results of assessment instruments administered in HIST 2302 Methodology during the spring, summer, and fall terms of 2008, as well as the ACAT history test administered in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar during the spring and fall terms of 2008. 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.

Discussions with Methodology students in past semesters and information from the advising process disclosed that there has been a shortage of available seats in the Methodology course, which is taught in spring, summer, and fall. The Department therefore offered two sections of Methodology in fall 2008 to respond to this problem.

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.

I propose shortening the examination. A serious answer to all of the questions on the current version of the examination would require more than the allotted 75 minutes. As the examination is ungraded, many students do not appear to exert enormous energy in writing responses to the questions. I think that if we shortened the examination to focus more on the four questions that are most revealing, we might obtain better information about what our students have done and what they can do.

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 2008 had already taken some upper-level history courses. Students cited an interest in history as the main reason for choosing the major. They also indicated that family members with an interest in history and high school teachers were influences in sparking their own desire to study history. Another common reason for choosing the major was a desire to teach history in the high schools.

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?*

I propose eliminating this question from the assessment examination. It elicits answers that tend to be superficial.

The answers do show that students most often begin their research on the internet and rely on it heavily. One student wrote, "In my personal opinion, it is no longer necessary to go to the library to do research, since most books & articles can be found online."

It was encouraging to see that some students assigned priority to finding relevant 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.*

One student wrote, "I have learned that historical study is, at the collegiate level, mainly the study of questions." Needless to say, I found this wholly convincing.

Several students observed that interpretations of the past change over time and are subject to bias. Many espouse a confused historical relativism. A number of students wrote that the study of history involves a good deal of work, including especially research.

Students expressed interest in a wide range of subjects. A substantial number of students express a particular interest in ancient history.

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.*

I propose eliminating this question from the assessment examination. It elicits answers that tend to be obvious.

6. *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.*

The better essays generally showed that the student benefited from earlier classes. One student who took American Diplomacy posed and answered the question: “Why did the United States develop an isolationist foreign policy for much of its history.” Another student who took a Colonial America course wrote on the question: “What role did high literacy rates in North America play on [sic] the American Revolution?” Several students wrote on some question related to the American Civil War.

One student wrote a short but solid essay on how the American Revolution helped lead to the French Revolution. One essay, by a student interested in musicology, posed the question of how Giovanni Gabrieli’s compositions revolutionized music during the Renaissance and argued that the introduction of changing dynamic levels within a composition represented a significant innovation.

On a less historically-minded note, one student wrote on the question: “How will America change” with the nomination of Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate for President? The essay concluded that “we will have to wait and see.”

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. Some of the questions address matters that I regard as insignificant.

In spring 2008, 14 students took the exam. Eleven of the students were planning graduate studies and two were transfers. Individual overall scores ranged from the 9th percentile to the 78th percentile. The aggregate results were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
U.S. 1820 to 1890	484	44
U.S. 1890 to 1940	467	37
U.S. 1763 to 1820	445	29
European Early Modern	488	45
European Medieval	447	30
European Modern - Present	477	41
OVERALL	445	29

In fall 2008, 20 students took the exam. Two were transfers and 11 were planning graduate students. Individual overall scores ranged from one student in the 13th percentile to one student in the 85th percentile. The aggregate results for fall 2007 were:

Area	Standard Score	Percentile Score
U.S. 1820 to 1890	508	53
U.S. 1890 to 1940	512	55
U.S. 1763 to 1820	497	49
European Early Modern	469	38
European Medieval	432	25
European Modern - Present	489	46
OVERALL	469	38

The papers in the course revealed that students continue to struggle with historiography and identifying the most important secondary sources to address.

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 as expressed in the Department's Learning Outcomes, which we revised in fall 2008. 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." In the report covering 2006 I recommended that the department consider adopting a new assessment instrument for students in HIST 4484 Senior Seminar.

I recommend that the department assess student learning in the program through the following instruments:

1. A four-question assessment examination given at the second class meeting of HIST 2302 Methodology.
2. A three-page paper using a novel as a primary source assigned in HIST 2302. This paper will be assessed by the instructor applying a rubric that states what elements the paper should include.
3. A sample of the Senior Seminar papers assessed by two faculty members applying a rubric.
4. A reflective essay in Senior Seminar asking students to describe what they have learned in their undergraduate education and to evaluate what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the program.
5. The Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) examination in History, which is taken by history majors seeking certification to teach in Georgia high schools.

I recommend that the Department stop using the ACAT examination as an assessment instrument. There is precedent for reducing reliance on a standardized multiple-choice examination for history majors. The History Department at Eastern Michigan University, for example, uses no such examination. Instead, it assesses student learning for its majors only in its methods class History 300, mainly by applying a standardized rubric to student writing.¹ The proposal outlined here would represent a step toward a student portfolio model of assessment, which seems to be gaining support among history departments.²

The GACE examination would continue to offer the department information about how our students are scoring on a standardized multiple-choice examination that covers factual material related to U.S. and world history. That examination is not administered by us, but we can access the scores of our students. The latest scores on the GACE examination for history majors are encouraging. Over 94 percent of history majors passed the examination. That percentage compares favorably with students from other majors at the University of West Georgia in the relevant GACE subject examination.

There remains the question about what to do in the way of assessment of student learning in the survey courses. The Department might consider the use of a standardized test at the level of the survey course, where there is not the time to dedicate to developing the higher-order skills.

¹ Russell Olwell and Ronald Delph, "Implementing Assessment and Improving Undergraduate Writing: One Department's Experience," *The History Teacher* 38, no. 1 (2004): 21-34. In addition, the History Department at Kennesaw State University recently decided to eliminate use of an examination like the ACAT as part of its assessment. Unpublished paper presentation by Susan Rouse, Kennesaw State University, "Assessing Student Learning in the Humanities: Designing, Implementing and Using Results for Program Improvement," at the 2008 Assessment Institute (October 27, 2008).

² See Marybeth Carlson and Laura Hunt Yungblut, "Where the Wild Papers Are: Producing a Student Portfolio in the Undergraduate Seminar," *The History Teacher* 32, no. 1 (1998): 43-56.

Finally, the Department might consider experimenting with a course to bridge Methodology and Senior Seminar to address weaknesses in Senior Seminar papers.