

Response to the Program Review Team's Report on the History Department

Weber State University

April 13, 2012

The History Department was pleased with the Program Review Committee's Report, appreciating both its praise for the department and its helpful recommendations. Our responses to its recommendations follow.

STANDARD A - MISSION STATEMENT

From the Program Review Team's Report:

History is the record of political, social, economic, and cultural events and achievements of humankind. Historians analyze and evaluate this record in an attempt to understand and interpret the present. The Department's chief goal, therefore, is to transmit both the content of history and the necessary analytical and interpretive skills to its students. More specifically, the Department seeks to prepare students for careers in teaching and history-related fields and to provide courses that contribute to the general education and lifelong learning of all students.

The Department, therefore, provides undergraduate programs for students wishing to complete degrees that include the History Major, History Teaching Major, History Minor, History Teaching Minor, Public History Minor, and Social Science Composite Teaching Major. It also provides courses that contribute substantially to the University's commitment to General Education and cultural diversity, promote a general interest in the study of History, assist students in achieving their college and career goals, and fulfill the state's American Institutions requirement to promote the development of an informed citizenry. The History Department also takes an active role in providing appropriate services, resources, and activities to the region that the University serves.

The Department of History's Mission Statement captures many of the critical roles that faculty and staff play in the university's activities, and clearly defines the discipline of History and the programs offered by the unit. The statement could be streamlined by removing the 'therefore' phrases, which lessen its impact. The last two sentences could be revised to be more specifically representative of the History Department's unique strengths, including its significant, ongoing, and successful outreach efforts and the breadth and substance of the Department's important service to the region.

Program Review Team members suggest that the Mission Statement tie the Department's public service role more precisely to recent national initiatives in higher education. Reflecting programs sponsored by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the William & Flora Hewitt Foundation, History should consider highlighting its rich contribution to "civic engagement." We find that the Department is ahead of the national curve in this area. The Department demonstrates civic engagement in at least four ways: the strong and continuous contribution its faculty make to the "American Institutions" requirement

in the state of Utah; the history education it carries to the broader public through its on- and off-campus lecture series; the service that its public history program provides to popular museums, agencies, archives, and organizations in northern Utah; and the remarkably extensive professional development faculty provide to K-12 teachers in the area (in projects that connect university faculty with a wide community of educators and that offer meaningful, substantive content to the lessons school children receive in their classes). Indeed, the History Department is uniquely situated to provide key leadership in national discussions regarding instructional alignment and higher education collaborations with K-12.

All history classrooms model a key feature of civic life that fills a critical need in contemporary America: the role of civil dialogue. With its modestly-sized upper-division classes, flexible course formats that allow for a seminar-like setting, and thoughtful faculty who guide classroom debates, the Weber State History Department helps its undergraduates understand the conduct and character of “civil” public discussion. Students gain a greater appreciation for the ways in which dialogue on complex issues needs to proceed on a basis of evidence (rather than mere assertion), mutual respect (rather than rude behavior), clear communication (rather than disjointed argument), and self-critical reflection (rather than claims to absolute truth). The Department’s commitment to student-focused instruction allows this important civic education and discourse to occur in its classrooms, and it provides a model for the interaction of civic engagement and teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Civic engagement, quality instruction, and public scholarship are clear strengths of the Department and should be highlighted in its Mission Statement.

The Review Team found through its interviews with administration and faculty that the Department is moving toward a more research-oriented focus. The Mission Statement does not mention the Department’s commitment to research. We feel that the Department faculty’s role in creating new knowledge, interpreting historical materials for public audiences, and publishing historical scholarship should be incorporated into the Mission Statement.

The History Department’s Response:

We have revised our mission statement in response to the committee’s recommendation. The new mission statement more accurately represents the variety of activities that the Department and its faculty engage in. (Changes appear in bold typeface.)

*History is the record of political, social, economic, and cultural events and achievements of humankind. Historians analyze and evaluate this record in an attempt to understand and interpret the present. The Department’s chief goal is to transmit both the content of history and the necessary analytical and interpretive skills to its students. More specifically, the Department seeks to prepare students for careers in teaching and history-related fields and to provide courses that contribute to the general education and lifelong learning of all students. **Through its courses, the Department also endeavors to provide students with models of and skills for civic engagement and dialogue. The Department and its faculty are also committed to creating new knowledge, interpreting historical materials for public audiences, and publishing historical scholarship that advances the field.***

*The Department provides undergraduate programs for students wishing to complete degrees that include the History Major, History Teaching Major, History Minor, History Teaching Minor, Public History Minor, and Social Science Composite Teaching Major. It also provides courses that contribute substantially to the University's commitment to General Education and cultural diversity, promote a general interest in the study of History, assist students in achieving their college and career goals, and fulfill the state's American Institutions requirement to promote the development of an informed citizenry. **The History Department also is committed to building and sustaining relationships with community members, educational institutions, and the larger public in the region.***

STANDARD B-CURRICULUM

From the Program Review Team's Report:

The Review Team found one area of concern regarding curriculum during its review. The faculty reported that in order to continue to fulfill the full range of courses, especially in world history, additional faculty resources are needed. The faculty frequently referred to the need to offer Middle Eastern history, which is not currently an area supported by faculty expertise. In addition, the faculty cited a need to preserve the future of Latin American history in the Department in relation to imminent retirements. It is essential that comprehensive undergraduate history departments maintain breadth in coverage, particularly in non-United States and non-European areas.

The History Department's Response:

The review team expressed concern at the absence of a Middle Eastern historian and also encouraged us to hire another Latin Americanist after Henry Ibarguen retires. The Department shares the review team's concerns. It will begin a search in the fall for a new Latin Americanist, and as soon as funds become available, it will conduct another search for a Middle-Eastern historian. In the future, we hope to expand our coverage of other regions of the world, as well.

STANDARD C-STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

From the Program Review Team's Report:

The Review Team has one suggestion regarding assessment. While the Department has an exceptionally strong record on assessment, the Department of History's web page does not have a section devoted to the subject (at least not one that the Review Team could locate). Considering the importance of assessment in general discussions of higher education *and* the focus of History's major professional organization (the American Historical Association), it may be helpful for the Department to briefly refer to the fact that it conducts assessment of its programs on its web page, perhaps spelling out the broad learning outcomes for the discipline as well as displaying the varied tools faculty have developed for monitoring student learning. The

Department may wish to highlight the state role it plays in the area of assessment, and/or provide a link to the Office of the Provost at Weber State for information regarding assessment.

The History Department's Response:

While we already have a section on our website devoted to learning outcomes and our mission, we will augment that with a further description of the variety of assessments we do of our program. Our hope is to make this change over the summer.

STANDARD D- ACADEMIC ADVISING

The Program Review Team had no recommendations.

STANDARDS E and F – FACULTY and PROGRAM SUPPORT

From the Program Review Team's Report:

The Department of History is supported by a very dedicated and productive faculty. Our interviews with faculty members revealed that they enjoy their students and are continually looking for ways to improve teaching. Despite a 4/4 teaching load, all of the faculty we interviewed cited important ways that they contribute to scholarly activity, including public scholarship and widely distributed publications.

Faculty cited concerns about thin operating budgets, particularly in the area of travel, and about the deplorable state of their building (which they share with other social sciences units). Among their building concerns were poor heating, cooling, and ventilation; crowded conditions; inadequate classroom facilities and space; and seasonal insect infestations, including flies and wasps. These problems have an adverse impact, the faculty noted, on student success and retention.

During our meeting with the Dean of the College, it became clear that the vision for the college is to move in a more research-oriented direction. Dean Harrold stressed his interest in encouraging faculty to explore any and all avenues of external support available in different fields. The review team reminded the dean of two discipline-specific points: that grants for historical scholarship typically amount to small sums of money compared to funds available in other areas of study (because research “costs” are quite low—and low-tech—in conventional archival work); and funding in history grants rarely covers indirect or overhead costs that show up on university budget sheets. While recognizing the modest nature of history support, the department should still adopt an important pro-active stance: by compiling clear information about all grants *sought* by history faculty as well as all grants *received* by department members.

We recommend that additional incentives for scholarship be instituted at the department and/or college level, including opportunities to access travel funding (perhaps through competitive means at the college level) and possibly release time support. Our research indicates that the university-wide 4/4 teaching load is not consistently defined across colleges. Other colleges may not be as insistent on making sure that each faculty member have precisely 12 TCH credit loads, but rather that the average TCH load for each member of the faculty in a department is about 12/semester. The Utah Board of Regents defines workload policy as an average for all faculty (Utah Board of Regents Policies, Academic Affairs, 4.1.2.), suggesting that there may be some

flexibility in workload assignments on a semester-by-semester basis as long as the Department's average is maintained at 12 credits per semester per full-time faculty member.

Low faculty salaries were also identified by faculty as a potential morale issue. The 2006 review team made note of the exceptionally low salaries received by the faculty of the History Department. The problem remains in 2012. The Review Team understands how difficult it has been (and may continue to be) to address salary needs at the institution. It is not clear from faculty comments or our research how salaries are managed across colleges, but the perception that there are differences and inequities between colleges—and within the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences—has contributed to lower morale. In addition, History's faculty may be more inclined to seek additional sources of revenue such as overload or summer teaching, as well as on-line opportunities. This should have the understandable result of there being even less time available for scholarly pursuits. [Nevertheless, the quality and quantity of faculty scholarship in this Department is enormously impressive, as evidenced by the acclaimed books that have been published.]

Low salaries in History are compounded by the embarrassingly low salary received by the department's talented—and essential—office manager, Angela Swaner. Ms. Swaner exudes a warm, welcoming spirit and seemingly endless energy as she attends to the accounting requirements of her job, the paperwork of tracking departmental business, the coordination of History's special activities sponsored by History, and the advising services she provides to students. She draws no attention to herself in these multiple tasks; but it is clear that the department could not function well (or long) without her guidance. Yet her \$21,000 salary is shamefully low for such an invaluable member of an institution's support team.

Due to the recent economic situation, History is down in its faculty numbers by one individual. The Review Team recognizes that funding for the expansion of faculty lines is enormously challenging for the institution as a whole. We recommend, however, that the History Department take an important first step in this process. The department head should convene a special meeting in the near future to discuss a single subject: prioritizing possible future faculty lines. Faculty should have a clear and unified sense of where they want to go in the coming years *should* additional monies be available for a new line.

At the same time, though, there are individuals who are not full-time departmental faculty but who take part in its assignments and advising. For example, Dr. Kathy Payne, who has a PhD in history, is on the Library faculty. She contributes a great degree of time and effort to the History Department. In addition to serving as a key resource for its faculty and students, she advises students on scholarly projects. If she were to leave or retire, in essence the Department would be losing a valued member. While it is always beneficial to have such serendipitous assistance, this circumstance ought to be considered when evaluating the Department's needs. If and when Dr. Payne leaves, it is arguable that the History Department should be granted another faculty slot in hers or a related area.

The Review Team would like to add that the faculty are in clear agreement about the positive and effective leadership provided by Dr. Susan Matt. She is a superb role-model for the Department. Given that she has expressed interest in not continuing to serve as Chair for much

longer, it would be wise to determine who else might be interested in this crucial position, and even begin a transition toward the end of whatever she feels is her last term.

The History Department's Response:

The Program Review Team notes that the Department is down a member. We actually are down 2 members (not counting Professor Henry Ibarguen, who will soon retire). We hope to get support to fill these positions in the future.

Meanwhile, in an effort to retain the excellent faculty we have, and to respond to the review team's suggestions, we will look for ways to reduce teaching loads, when possible. This may involve negotiating with the dean and the provost.

We will also begin to follow the team's suggestion that we keep track of grants applied for and grant monies received. The Department will also look for ways to increase travel budgets, funds permitting.

We will also continue to lobby the administration for greater equity in salaries, both for faculty and staff. We are particularly struck by the observation that other WSU colleges have established equity across disciplines, so that, for instance, assistant professors are all paid the same wage, regardless of whether they are zoologists or physicists. We will lobby our dean to make this a new policy for the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, as well.

STANDARD G-RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL COMMUNITIES

From the Program Review Team's Report:

In the area of outreach and development, the Review Team has two recommendations. We recommend that the History Department try to cultivate as strong a set of ties to its large alumni community as possible. The department might wish to consider a strategy used by colleagues in the History Department of Utah State University: gathering an email list of alumni; asking them to participate in a survey related to assessment; and posing questions about the knowledge, skills, and competencies alumni developed – or wished they had cultivated – while they were students. The project proved to be very useful in building good will (and useful information) from alumni on the Logan campus. In addition, the Department might consider creating an Advisory Board populated by alumni and local business owners in order to cultivate friends and donors and to create avenues for community advice on issues pertaining to development.

Secondly, with an active and engaged undergraduate honor society (Phi Alpha Theta), the department should consider tapping into the student organization as a forum for presentations focused on “life after the B.A.” Annual meetings sponsored by PAT might gather students together to hear faculty discuss the basics of graduate school or the shifting nature of the job market. It might also prove encouraging to students to hear from alumni who could be invited back to campus to talk about the directions their lives took after graduating with a history major.

All in all, the Review Team is very impressed with the outreach capabilities and efforts of the Department.

The History Department's response:

We are trying to keep in better contact with our alumni. An email database would be helpful in this effort, and our development officer, Nathan Clark, has told us that he may be able to provide us with one. We will also follow the review team's recommendation and try to use Phi Alpha Theta to connect present students with graduates of the program.