



Department of History

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To: Dean Sheryl Fontaine, College of the Humanities and Social Sciences
Associate Dean Jessica Stern
History Department Chair Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi

Re: External Review of the CSUF Department of History

Dear Dean Fontaine,

We are pleased to present our assessment of the History Department based on our visit to campus and review of material provided by the Department. We found the history faculty to be committed scholar/teachers who are actively working for the long-term success of the Department with good humor and resilience despite significant institutional setbacks. The Department has taken steps to address a dramatic fall in FTES and thus resources. However, challenges remain for faculty and students. We have detailed those issues that stand out below and we encourage the University to recognize and financially support this outstanding group of scholar/teachers.

Curriculum

Executive order 1100 reduced the number of General Education (G.E.) units that can be offered in the category D: Social Science. As a result, the two courses offered previously by History for all CSUF students are no longer required of non-majors. This shift in G.E. drastically reduced demand for history courses, forced cuts to faculty lecturers, and reduced the number of Full Time Equivalent Students (FTES) taught by the department. Since FTES determines allocations of resources and funds, this is a huge setback for the History Department. The Department reacted to this shock by increased faculty attention to its long-term strategic planning and rethinking curriculum. Faculty seem to agree that although painful, the experience has reinvigorated their focus on their roles in the Department and on curriculum.

According to the self-study, the Department's long-term priorities include:

- Revisit, revise, and update the undergraduate major and learning objectives for core courses; decide on the place of the new 200-level courses in the major and minor
- Evaluate existing online lower-division courses and consider expanding the online/hybrid offerings at the upper-division level

Our findings suggest that such revisions represent a near-term high priority. Given the student and faculty awareness that History 300A and 300B are taught by a number of faculty with a variety of approaches to content, it is clear that students do not share a common baseline of knowledge, concepts and competencies after completion of those two classes. Further, students observe that their preparation for History 490 is uneven depending on what their experiences in 300 A & B.

Since these are core courses for majors, the Department should consider rethinking its approach to these foundational courses to focus on what core competencies/concepts it expects faculty to cover in the two 300-level courses. While keeping academic freedom as the overriding principle, the process at arriving at such agreement should consider a process centered on faculty freedom and student learning outcomes.

One approach would be to have the Curriculum Committee map the curriculum and make recommendations for full faculty consideration. This iterative process results department-wide agreement on which student learning objectives should be emphasized in each course: for each learning objective and for each core concept, a map would outline where each concept/content/competency is introduced, where it should be practiced, and in which classes students should demonstrate its mastery. Coming to a consensus on a curricular map of those core courses will focus the faculty in healthy, vibrant discussions and should result at the end in cooperative decision-making with the least amount of conflict. And, as a result, faculty teaching the two courses would have a common framework with ample room for academic freedom. It would further provide those teaching 490 with a set of expectations of students' foundation on which to further scaffold learning. Once the faculty agree on what content the courses should cover, some thought could be given on whether the courses should be sequenced; currently there is a restriction on taking them concurrently, but it is not clear that one is built on the foundation of the other.

The attention to expanding lower division offerings with new 200-level courses expected to appeal to non-majors is commendable. How those courses fit into the major requirements should also occur within a rethinking of the overall major requirements.

Some students report difficulty fulfilling the major requirements because they lack a plan of what upper-division courses will be offered in the two years before they graduate. Part of the difficulty is that History has a broad set of upper-division courses in its curriculum; the scheduling of upper-division courses is constrained by enrollment patterns (low enrolled courses at risk of cancellation by the Dean). Further, the 3/3 teaching load requires higher student-to-faculty ratios, thereby reducing the number of offerings by tenure/tenure track faculty in any given semester. To address this, the department may consider having a menu of offerings where some less frequently offered courses are in a category and other courses are in a different category. The Department would require students to take an upper division History course from Group A, one from Group B, and one from Group C.

In addition to having sets of courses grouped, the department could provide students an average two-year schedule of what Group A courses will be offered in Fall and Spring as well as which Group B courses will be offered in Fall and Spring, etc. Giving students a transparent plan of upcoming schedules could reduce both time to graduation and student frustration over planning their upper division semesters. More importantly, such transparent two-year planning has the additional advantage of providing leverage against the cancellation of low-enrolled courses; showing that there are X number of students planning to take a course or needing it to graduate is a good argument for retaining a lower enrolled course with a demonstrated “demand” to reduce time to graduation.

The same approach to two-year schedules in the graduate program would reduce student anxiety and facilitate timely progress in relevant coursework.

Advising, Retention and Graduation

The Department has recently changed its undergraduate advising structure from using two undergraduate advisors to an “all faculty” model. The bureaucratic side of advising (graduation checks, moving courses etc.) remains concentrated in a few hands, while other aspects (suggesting courses, career guidance, etc.) are shared among faculty. Faculty seem enthusiastic about the change and note that whereas in the past, many did not really understand how the major worked, they all now have a clearer sense of the major as a whole. Students, on the other hand, said that they were still unclear about requirements, and how to progress efficiently through the major.

One potential benefit of all-faculty advising is that if each faculty member is responsible for a relatively small group of students (we were told around 25), they could be in active contact with all of those students and be able to identify those at risk of dropping out, leaving the major, or doing poorly in their courses. However, faculty said that they continue to see only a subset of their advisees—typically those most motivated and least at risk. In the interests of boosting retention and graduation rates, the Department may want to consider additional steps to boost the number of students who get regular faculty advising. Registration holds are one way to insist that students visit their advisors. It might also be possible to have students in History 300A or other core courses tracked for getting advising. Finally, bureaucratic hurdles can present advising opportunities, i.e. when students come in to move a class for a G.E. requirement it is also a chance to ask about their interests and goals, see how they are doing overall, find out if there are barriers to progress and success (work, family responsibilities, mental health issues, homelessness etc.). The department may want to consider strategies for using such bureaucratic moments to provide further reaching advising.

History 300A is a point of first contact with many transfer students and a way to reach all majors. This is a place where the Department, if it is not already doing so, could promote participation in a History Students’ Association, regular advising, and events that can boost engagement with and commitment to the major.

The M.A. program is very large, with 180 students. The numbers reflect both robust incoming classes and long roads to graduation. Many M.A. students work full time and have family responsibilities that may slow their progress through the program. But the

graduation pace seems to also reflect some bottlenecks and some shortfalls in advising. The Department has already recognized that the M.A. thesis has been a barrier to progress in the program. They have taken the logical step of encouraging more students to choose comprehensive exams as a culminating project. However graduate students still seem to think comps are a lesser choice. It would be useful to take steps to change the culture around exams and theses, including messaging that comprehensive exams can be rigorous, rewarding, and a path to Ph.D. programs, jobs, etc.

Graduate students also reported that their primary advising on the program comes from a staff member—the graduate coordinator. They seemed much less clear on the role of the two graduate advisors, and reported not feeling confident that they knew the program requirements or could count on having the courses they needed for graduation offered on a predictable schedule. Faculty also said that it was the graduate coordinator who had taken the initiative to identify and track down graduate students who had fallen out of touch or ceased making progress on culminating projects. A good staff member is an essential part of any successful graduate program. Nevertheless, the work of advising students on how to tailor the degree to serve their intellectual interests and professional goals seems best suited to a faculty member who can then broker mentoring relationships with other faculty, advise the chair on a predictable rotation of graduate level courses, oversee progress to degree, guide students to appropriate culminating activities, etc. A standing graduate committee could also help with such planning to ensure that graduate admissions align with course offerings and overall department resources, and that students are progressing through the program.

Recruitment

Since losing the World History GE categories, the Department has seen a dramatic fall in FTES and has been encouraged to boost its number of majors. But recruiting majors is challenging, especially since the Department has just lost its most powerful tool: courses that touched every undergraduate on campus. The Department's efforts to identify and develop new GE offerings are essential to attracting new majors. So too would be placing some of the most dynamic and engaging instructors in GE courses and having them encourage strong lower division students to consider majoring in history (to some degree this appears to already be happening). Active advising and recruitment of accepted and incoming freshmen who have identified history as a potential major would also be useful. It might also be useful to see which disciplines history majors transfer from or transfer to. If there is a pattern, that might identify pools of potential majors.

The Department has decided to reduce the units required for a history minor. This, and promoting the minor, seem like good steps towards augmenting enrollments and increasing the visibility of the Department among undergraduates. Here too it would be useful to know which majors the history minor typically pairs with. It might be possible to coordinate reciprocal advising and recruitment of minors with those departments that have already shown themselves to be complementary.

Recruitment could also be helped by improvements in the website and in the Department's physical space. In the absence of effective spaces where students can get information about

the Department, meet each other, interact with faculty, and build a sense of community, it becomes more difficult to attract people to the major.

Priorities and Long-term Plans

The Department's priorities and long-term plans reflect its current challenges as well as its ability to benefit through existing pedagogical and intellectual strengths. The priorities generally fall into the categories of curriculum, financial support, and student relations. In light of recent changes to the GE requirement that severely challenged its curriculum model, the Department requires time to develop its response in terms of new and expanded courses (online and classroom), modification of the major, and attention to learning objectives. Faculty expressed a strong confidence in their ability to enact these shifts if given the time and modest support from the University. The Department's compelling need for financial resources include course buyouts for curricular development, outreach to alumni and prospective new majors, and the larger goal of a faculty hire in the field of Early Modern Atlantic and Digital History. This goal is well-supported by the Department's current strengths in World and Digital History; indeed, the Department has been far ahead of the History discipline's trend in these two fields and should be rewarded for its leadership.

In terms of financial support, both the college and the university need to recognize its unique asset in the Center for Oral and Public History. To express this in the strongest possible way, any R-1 university in the country would enthusiastically welcome and support the COPH with a continuing operating budget and would utilize the Center for university publicity purposes. CSUF should seriously consider the many possibilities offered by the COPH. Finally, under the broad category of student relations the Department priorities emphasize its need to monitor UG and Graduate student progress through an all-faculty advising system, expand its career planning for majors, increase its outreach to alumni, and revamp its website. Conversations with faculty, staff, and Chair Rostam-Kolayi assured us that these ongoing endeavors are central and workable matters for the Department.

The History Department's long-term plans reflect these priorities especially in the areas of curriculum development, the retention and expansion of majors and minors, and alumni outreach. However, the plans include two additional items that demand attention from the college and university. First, the Department faculty embodies a group of increasingly productive scholars who want to continue publishing with the top academic journals and university presses. The University can support their professional and research/creative activities with varying types of assistance and, in the process, retain these valuable colleagues. Second, and most urgently, the Department's decrepit infrastructure demands immediate attention. The 8th floor of the Humanities Building is among the most depressing and antiquated institutional environments we have encountered. The students, faculty, and staff all recognize this fact and they note its affects on department morale. In an era of fewer resources for the Humanities and Social Sciences in general, the physical infrastructure of the History Department indicates a shocking lack of attention on the part of the University.

We appreciated the opportunity to interact with the faculty, staff, and students of the CSUF

History Department. It embodies a collegial and supportive group of professionals who are dedicated to the university's mission. We hope the university will assist the Department in the ways outlined in this report.

Sincerely,

Dr. David Iglar

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Dr. Eileen T. Walsh

Professor of Sociology, CSUF

Dr. Caitlin Murdock

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