

THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY'S POSITION PAPER ON GEC HISTORICAL STUDIES PROPOSALS

History is a discipline, a way of thinking that emphasizes careful and contextualized reading of primary and secondary sources, the construction of historical arguments in writing and speech, and a critical attitude toward conventional accounts of the past. To become professional historians, graduate students are trained for six or seven years in seminars, each writes seminar papers, a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation. Above all, graduate students need to learn to think historically and critically about the past and its relationships to the present. Yet there is a popular notion that almost any course organized chronologically is "history". There is also a view that history can be taught by almost anybody---something no one would say about French or chemistry. Extensive reading of secondary sources on such a topic as the Civil War or the reign of Elizabeth I does not, however, make the reader a historian. The Department of History believes that the purpose of the GEC Historical Studies requirement is not just to introduce our students to the past but also to train them in historical ways of thinking. Historians use their analytical techniques to study the causes of cultural, economic, political and social changes in particular societies and determine the common characteristics of those societies in order to make broader generalizations about human history. It is the combination of the analysis of the particular and synthesis of the general that distinguishes Historical Study as a discipline and differentiates it from fields that offer courses framed simply as a chronological, fact-oriented sequence.

Departments, colleges, and other units might think that their undergraduate majors should study the historical development of their discipline. Such courses, required or not, can make sense. But such discipline-specific courses should be scrutinized carefully for their suitability as a GEC Historical Studies course. If students' acquaintance with history is only in courses within their own major, they may not gain the breadth to which the GEC aspires. In a university emphasizing cross-disciplinary work, it can be a disservice to students' education if they learn their "history" within the narrow confines of their own major.

GEC HISTORICAL STUDIES COURSES

The CCI Arts and Humanities Subcommittee scrutinizes the syllabi of courses proposed for GEC Historical Studies status. The Department of

History is asked to comment on and concur with such proposals. Some syllabi are fine. History has concurred and will continue to concur in their offering as GEC Historical Studies courses (e.g., History of Art 201/202, PAES 210/211).

Other syllabi are deficient in important ways, a fact that reveals the proposers' failure to understand the nature of Historical Studies. The CCI Arts and Humanities Subcommittee ordinarily encourages the proposers of the inadequate syllabi to revise them once, twice, or more until they get it "right". In a tribute to the way the Department of History teaches its courses, the proposers redo the syllabi until they resemble History's courses. Specifically, they add such things as essay questions on examinations, papers or book reviews, and more extensive and challenging readings, including primary sources. We think that courses should not just look like history but should be historical in the professional sense of that word. We are concerned that adaptations of syllabi do not automatically make a course suitable for GEC Historical Studies. For instance, not every paper is an analytical paper, and the meaning of many sources is not evident, but must be analyzed from a historical perspective by someone who is trained to do it. A failure to keep the distinction in mind between syllabi and historical training of those using the syllabi diminishes the quality and threatens the spirit of the GEC Historical Studies category for our students.

SOME SUGGESTED GUIDELINES

The Department of History proposes for the Subcommittee's consideration the following guidelines to remedy some deficiencies it perceives in the way courses are evaluated for inclusion in the GEC Historical Studies category.

- It is in the best interests of our students that professionally-trained historians teach GEC Historical Studies courses. That expectation does not keep the teaching of all GEC Historical Studies courses within the Department of History. A number of academic units employ trained historians. We usually find their syllabi and their approach to the subject acceptable. We have and will continue to concur in course proposals from trained historians.
- We are concerned that once a course has been approved, slippage from its GEC Historical Studies syllabus may occur. For instance, qualified faculty may retire or take other positions; and courses may revert to the original syllabus's inadequate approach. If a

course is part of the GEC curriculum for five years or a decade, there are no assurances about who will teach it and what its syllabus will look like. Since departmental chairs and college deans have the responsibility for assigning courses to faculty, we ask the ASC Curriculum Committee to encourage them to take seriously their task of assigning qualified instructors in the GEC Historical Studies courses under their supervision. In the ideal situation, the responsible administrators would assign trained historians to teach these courses although faculty members who participate in the community of historians would probably be acceptable as well. We expect that faculty who are neither trained historians nor participants in the wider community of historians will not be assigned to teach a GEC Historical Studies course. To be blunt, if no qualified instructor is available, then the GEC Historical Studies course should not be taught.

- We are also open to concurring with syllabi offered by faculty without degrees in History but whose scholarly profile gives assurance that they are qualified to teach Historical Studies. The discipline of history is organized in a national and an international community of scholars. Historians participate in those intellectual communities in many ways, including the publication of peer-reviewed historical books, the publication of peer-reviewed articles in the many historical journals, and the presentation of papers at professional meetings of historians. If Ohio State faculty members are going to teach GEC Historical Studies courses, they should participate to some significant degree in the wider community of historians. If they do not participate in the community of historians, there should be serious doubts about their qualifications to teach GEC Historical Studies courses. When anyone seeks approval for GEC Historical Studies status for a course or courses, the proposer(s) should submit a *curriculum vitae* to establish the credentials of the proposer(s) as historian(s), broadly understood.
- The American Historical Association has issued benchmarks for historical thinking that we think some are worth paraphrasing.

Because a central feature of historical study is the analysis of primary sources, the proposers of courses for GEC Historical Studies status should show in detail how primary sources will

be incorporated into the courses, e.g. as the basis for discussion, for papers, or debates. To help students overcome “presentism”, that is, the tendency to interpret the past solely against the values and ideas of the present, proposed courses should help students understand the values of the past on their own terms through sources from that past.

Because Historical study demands a critical approach to interpretations, proposed courses should show how students will be introduced to the critical analysis of modern secondary works.

Because historical study is not a static recitation of past events, students should be introduced to causes and effects and to changes and continuities in history.

We appreciate this opportunity to express our views in this relatively brief way. We would welcome any responses from individual members of the Committee or from the Committee itself.

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