Proposed Plan for Assessment of Student Academic Achievement

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I. Department goals for student outcomes in relation to history majors.

A. Purposes of Historical Study

There is no way to explain adequately the purposes of studying history. There are, it would seem, exactly as many different explanations as the number of people who try to come up with those explanations. Nevertheless, one can try to articulate some generalized purposes for study in the discipline.

Perhaps most important among these is to enable the students to become aware of themselves in time. Time is the critical element that sets the discipline of history apart from other closely related disciplines such as politics, philosophy, and sociology. Good students of history will know the utterly commonplace: they exist in the present. But, in addition they will have learned that the present in which they continually exist is not an isolated and independent instant, in which they are fully free to choose outcomes. They will rather regard the present as the end point of a long, complex, and often daunting, process of human development. Perhaps they will learn that they are not as free as they had asserted when they were freshers, and that, willingly or not, they bear the baggage of the past.

Historical study has as one of its major functions the diminution of narcissism. One element of adolescence is the tendency to try to relate the world and all that is in it to oneself. History encourages its students to do the opposite-to relate themselves to the world as it has existed; "the past," as one historian has put it, "is a foreign land." History confronts its students with "the other," whether it be the experiences of an alien civilization (China, for example), or with the experiences of their own familiar civilization in an "other" context (Arkansas in during the Little Rock School Crisis, for example).

The study of history must also lead to an awareness of the processes of social development. Whether one looks at Russia in revolution, America in the late nineteenth century, or Africa before colonization, there is some wisdom to be gained from the study of earlier civilizations.

A further goal of historical study is the ability to handle genuine intellectual debate. As one begins to delve into the philosophy of history (as for example in History 3000--Historiography) one finds that the past does not have an independent existence. It is more than
a foreign land; it is a territory that is in its essence indescribable. Thus
written history is a partial reconstruction of one small aspect of the
totality of what has occurred, through the mind of a present-day
historian. It is present-day thought about the past. Students of
history must, therefore, be engaged in constant debate about the past:
what did occur in the past; how are the events of the past to be
recombined in an analysis or in a narrative sequence; and what
meaning and importance is to be attached to past actions.

This discussion of purposes could extend almost indefinitely. It is
important to note that these purposes tend toward the intangible.
Our list of philosophical principles sets vital, though essentially
unmeasureable, goals for the Department of History:

B. Specific tasks of the Department of History

Despite the non-measurable elements that are at the core of
departmental philosophy, it does seem that we as a department have
several specific goals in relation to our majors that can in some ways
be measured over time. These goals are:

1. To provide our students with a basic empirical knowledge of
the history of the United States, and of Western and non-
Western nations and cultures.

We meet this goal by requiring of our majors three courses in
American history, including the two-term sophomore
sequence, and a minimum of three upper-level courses in
non-American history.

2. To train our majors in the craft of the historian, in what might
be called the "doing" of history, teaching them to think like
historians.

This goal is addressed to some extent in all departmental
courses, but most specifically in History 3000 (Historiography)
and History 4100 (Senior Research Seminar).

3. To sharpen the communications skills—both written and oral—
that are essential in the study of history, and to the liberal arts
project as a whole.

Virtually every upper-division course in the department
requires significant pieces of formal written work, ranging
from research papers, to reviews of important books in the
field, to papers that evaluate problems of historical interpretation.

4. To impart to our students an appreciation of the ways in which historical developments have shaped contemporary events, thus informing them as citizens of the nation and of the globe.

This is an intangible goal, yet one which is reflected, to differing degrees, in each upper-division course offered by the department.

5. To prepare our departmental graduates for successful graduate and professional study.

This is reflected in the schools which our graduates attend following completion of their Hendrix studies.

II. Department goals for student outcomes in relation to Hendrix General Education requirements and to the goals of the college.

The History Department at Hendrix College has traditionally contributed a great deal toward the general education of our students. By the academic year 1998-1999 all of our full-time faculty will be participating in the teaching of the Western Intellectual Traditions course. Our course offerings touch upon extremely diverse areas of the world, ranging from the contemporary United States, to traditional China, to problems of South African development. Our upper-division courses (excepting History 3000 and 4100) are consistently populated by a majority of non-majors.

In relation to the aims of the College (listed in the 1996-1997 Hendrix College Catalog), courses offered by the Department focus, to varying degrees, on all ten of them.

1. "The use of critical and creative abilities" through the reading of (and making sense of) primary sources is an important element of most upper-division departmental courses.

2. The study of history is inextricably linked with other disciplines, for example foreign languages and sociology. For those of our majors who plan on engaging in graduate study in history, a basic sequence in a foreign language is mandated. The members of the department strongly encourage our majors to take courses in the Politics Department.
3. This aim is the focal point of the goals listed in Section I.B. of this report.

4. Written and oral communication skills, especially the former, are an integral component of every upper-division course in the Department of History. The members of the department encourage our majors to take a basic-level course in public speaking.

5. Use of reason and resources was also addressed in Section One of this report. History 3000, Historiography, the "methodology" course in the Department, is required of each major. This course focuses both on the philosophy of historical thinking, and on the resources that can be used for the solution of historical problems.

6. Questions of aesthetics arise every time art is mentioned in a history course.

7. The focus on other cultures is especially evident in the distribution of courses in the department: the catalog lists 14 American history courses, 2 in European history, and 13 in non-American, non-European. This last component has been significantly increased by the recent addition of an Africanist to the departmental staff.

8. By their focus on politics (especially recent politics, for example the Little Rock school crisis) and on the various kinds of historical development (for example, the growth of the British parliament, the origins and debasement of the Russian Revolution), the Department makes students aware of problems of effective civic participation.

9. The Department encourages its students to behave both independently and responsibly.

10. The members of the Department believe that cumulated intelligent reading is a recreational skill. Through the assigned reading of books of various content, ranging from historical fiction and historical narrative, to primary sources and journal articles, we hope to encourage in our students a life-long commitment to the development of the mind.
III. Assessment strategies for the Department of History

The Department proposes the following Actions for Assessment, this information to be provided to the Assistant Dean's Office on an annual basis, no later than May 15 of each academic year:

1. A list of the graduating seniors from the previous year, including their employment and/or graduate and professional school intentions. This list will be received from the Office of Career Development, and may contain updated information, depending on the availability of that information to the various departmental members.

2. A list of GRE scores, both the general GRE and the subject examination in history. This information is to be gotten from the Office of Career Development. Note please that the subject area examination is not a requirement for the majority of graduate schools, and thus the information provided will be both sporadic and not necessarily representative.

3. A list of the students who made presentations at NCUR (and a precis of the presentation of each), and at any other historical convention (such as Phi Delta Theta, the national historical honorary society.)

4. A short (one- to two-page) description of each senior seminar paper completed during the previous academic year (History 4100). A copy of each paper will remain on file in the office of the department chairman.

5. A list of upper division courses offered by the department during the previous academic year, together with the enrollment in each course. The department will also include the number of students in each course who were not departmental majors or minors. (There will, of course, be a margin of error in this last figure, owing to the relatively fluid concept of who is a major)

6. The members of the History Department will supply to the department chair:

   a. copies of A, B, and C grade in-class essay examinations from any one upper-level history class.
   b. copies of A, B, and C grade papers submitted in any other upper level history class.
These papers will not contain any indication of the name of the student who originally submitted the paper.

7. The History department will institute an annual survey of its majors during the spring term of their senior year. This instrument would seek the following kinds of information: what do the seniors feel was added to their net intellectual worth by study in the department; how well do they think that the department is living up to its goals; and what would they suggest to improve the quality of education from the department.

(N.B., items six and seven have been discussed among members of the department, but will not be submitted to a formal discussion until the Department's September meeting.)