

SENATE COMMITTEE ON UNIVERSITY PLANNING

Academic Unit Review – Summary

Department: History

Site Visit	12-13 March 2009
Date of Report	May 2009
Informal Response to Planning	May 2009
Formal Response to Planning	October 2009
Implementation Update	Expected Winter 2011
Midterm Review	Expected Fall 2014

Summary of Departmental Self-Study

The study of History is an ideal instrument of liberal education, as it develops analytical and communication skills and fosters knowledge and understanding of the institutions, ideas, groups, and individuals that have shaped our world. The Department of History offers Honours, Major, and Minor B.A. programs. It has five major objectives: teaching excellence; program coherence; knowledge creation (research); cooperation with other units in joint programs, shared courses, etc.; and university service. There are 7.0 FTE faculty members in the Department as well as an additional 1.0 FTE cross-appointed between History and Women’s Studies. The Departments of Classics and Religious Studies regularly offer cross-listed courses. Creating small group experiences for students is seen as a challenge. Graduates of the program have gone on successfully to graduate study and received prestigious scholarships (Rhodes, Commonwealth). The curriculum is structured around surveys at the second-year level and themes in the upper years. There are a mixture of 3- and 6-credit courses.

The Department identifies student numbers and field coverage as their primary weaknesses. The first stems from a disparity between workload and numerical staff strength, with many first-year classes being quite large. Each faculty member has a “stable” of courses that are offered in rotation. More expertise is needed in the early modern period; a majority of current faculty members focus on the twentieth century. The Department’s strengths include the quality of the staff as historians and teachers. Members are versatile and responsive. They are dedicated to the liberal arts ideal and the interdisciplinary participation that this entails. Substantial changes in curriculum have been implemented since the last review. Heavy teaching load and large demands for “service” have had an impact on scholarly productivity, but all faculty members are active scholars.

Given the dedication of the Department to the intimate teaching experience, the best way to address the identified weaknesses would be to appoint more staff. A priority would be the area of the Early Modern Atlantic World.

Summary of External Reviewers' Report

While the Department's evident commitment to high quality undergraduate education was praised, the reviewers suggest that the Department is in the grip of a "malaise" caused by heavy (and unequal) teaching loads, a lack of time for research, and recent personal confrontation. They urge the Department to use their common concern for excellent teaching as a catalyst to work together to address and rectify problems relating to workload and curriculum and thereby, it is hoped, develop tolerance and respect for how others teach. They suggest a facilitated department retreat focused on curriculum. For collegial governance to work, it "requires reasonableness, courtesy, an appreciation for, and fair consideration of, conflicting interests, and a commitment to work for the greater good of the whole."

For historians, finding time for research is crucial. The University is encouraged to find ways to support research in the Department and the institution as a whole (including a competition for research release awards) and to address what are viewed as significant service obligations, particularly but not exclusively for new faculty members.

In terms of curriculum, the program is clearly rigorous and of high quality. The reviewers suggest a review of prerequisites; making the honours thesis an option; having faculty members consider teaching more outside their immediate area of specialization; remove the restrictive prerequisites from 4000-level courses; establish enrolment caps for upper-level courses; maintain a mixture of 3- and 6-credit courses; allow students to take more courses outside the discipline; and develop a common, 4000-level seminar on historiography. The University should make the establishment of a writing centre a priority. It would be good to develop more cross-listed courses as well as interdisciplinary, team-taught courses.

There seems to be an agreement that a new appointment outside of Canadian, American, or European history is needed, but an appointment will not solve other issues the Department is facing. The Department needs to find a way to improve collegiality and find a process to address the changes suggested to curriculum, workload, and research. It would be good to establish informal research and social events for faculty and students.

Summary of Departmental Response

The Department was generally pleased by the astute and sympathetic review and state that they are in agreement with almost all of their recommendations. They disagree strongly with the recommendation to undertake a facilitated retreat on curriculum, fearing that it would be counterproductive and produce only a "contrived consensus" at best. Instead, the Department will hold a number of meetings focused solely on teaching and curricular issues. If consensus is

impossible on issues, they will be decided by majority vote. An external Chair for such meetings may be sought.

There are differing opinions in the Department with respect to most recommendations dealing with curriculum. They do not support caps on upper-level courses. While the Department agrees with the idea of equalizing workloads, there is a fear that doing so will exacerbate Departmental tensions.

Planning Committee and Provost Response

The Planning Committee and Provost are extremely concerned about the issues of collegiality in the Department and the negative effect that they may be having on students and staff. Indeed, it is our view that these tensions, unless addressed, may militate against the success of this review process.

The Departmental response was somewhat disappointing; in fact, to term it a “Departmental response” is in many respects a misnomer since it often has more the character of a chronicle of individual views faithfully recorded. The response implies a reluctance to tackle issues and to develop Departmental positions. While the Department indicated that it was in agreement with almost all recommendations, their comments often take the character of a “yes, but...” The response does not articulate a vision forward for the Department.

The Department is urged to think carefully about curriculum and to consider adopting a more flexible and open approach to teaching assignments (particularly outside of members’ immediate areas of specialization) and curriculum design and implementation. Although curricular matters are not in the purview of the Planning Committee, there is a consensus on the Committee that the Department continues to offer too many 4000-level courses, which has led to an inequality of workload that must be addressed. We recognize that the Department has a traditional orientation and is reluctant to risk ill-considered changes, but we would encourage them to recognize that not doing anything also carries consequences.

The Dean will work closely with the Department as it reviews its curriculum and will ensure that workloads are made more equitable in the future.

The University will arrange for the Department Head to meet with an external mediator to discuss the process of mediation and to devise a process that will work for the Department. (Mediation has been offered to the Department for over a year but has been refused.)

At present, there is no new position available for the Department. Should an opportunity arise in the future, the suggested area does make sense and is worth exploring further.