HISTORY DEPARTMENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT, 2009-2010

UNDERGRADUATE
Based on the assessment workshop held in January, 2009, we decided to focus our assessment primarily on the History Seminar because, according to the person who presented the workshop, “summative assessment” (captured in the Seminar) provides a more accurate reflection of student progress than “formative assessment” (captured in Theory & Practice, our introduction to the major). We continue to revise Theory and Practice based on results in the History Seminar. Students must receive a grade of C or better in Theory and Practice in order to proceed to the History Seminar – this is a requirement based on our assessment of the two courses that “bookend” the major.

Educational Goals:
The Department of History trains history majors to be critical thinkers, capable researchers, and careful writers. History and writing are interconnected, and history majors are expected to give serious attention to the development of their analytical, research, and writing skills. History courses should consistently provide students with opportunities to enhance their writing, research, and critical thinking abilities. Lower-division courses will introduce students to skills which will be reinforced and expanded upon in the Theory and Practice of History and other upper-division courses, culminating in an extended research paper in the History Seminar.

In their history course work, students should develop

writing skills including use of clear paper organization (thesis, evidence, conclusion) and paragraph organization; use of conventional writing styles (including proper citation methods: the department has adopted Chicago style as its citation style of choice, and this style should be required consistently); understanding of narrative and analytical writing

research skills including identifying appropriate materials for historical research; using the library/Internet: book catalogs (Skyline, Prospector, WorldCat), article databases (particularly America: History and Life, Historical Abstracts, and JSTOR), and interlibrary loan; critically assessing Internet sites for primary and secondary sources

analytical skills including differentiating between primary sources and secondary sources; close reading of primary sources; finding arguments in secondary sources; identifying thesis, evidence, strengths and weaknesses in various texts; understanding the concept of historiography; writing analytical papers

Theory and Practice: An Introduction to the Major
Theory & Practice introduces students to historical thinking and practice. In oral and written assignments, students are required to demonstrate their ability to write, research,
and analyze in historical perspective. The course contains focused assignments to target specific skills. They are:
1) a library exercise;
2) reaction papers which address assigned readings on how historians work and what practical and philosophical problems they encounter;
3) an annotated bibliography;
4) a primary source analysis;
5) a book review done according to very specific criteria which require students to identify the thesis of each chapter, relate it to the overall thesis of the book, and find a review in a professional journal to compare to their own reading of the book;
6) a final project, consisting of a short research paper designed to highlight the skills developed throughout the course.

We give Theory & Practice three times a year. In AY 2009-2010, a total of X students completed this class. While our goal was keep this class capped at 20 or so students, enrollment pressures led us to open the spring section, which wound up with x students.

**History Seminar**

By the time of the seminar, students should be competent in the areas introduced in Theory and Practice and reinforced throughout their history courses. The seminar is built around a broad topic with a common core of readings from which students can draw as they develop their own research projects. The goal is to make the topic flexible enough that students can focus their research papers around their own areas of interest within the theme. The topics for 2009-10 were Citizenship and National Identity in the fall and Urban History (focused on Denver sources) in the spring. Because this assessment report was due before the completion of the spring assessment of the seminar, the report will only address the material from Fall 2009.

History Seminar has students utilize the historical thinking and research skills they have developed in their History Major to produce a term paper based on primary and secondary sources. In the Fall of 2009, the seminar focused on students’ development of original research projects related to questions of citizenship and national identity from the 18th through the 20th century. Seminar participants spent the early part of the semester reading articles in common to become familiar with some of the key themes in the histories of citizenship and national identity. The remainder of the semester was devoted to on-going discussion of students’ research and writing processes.

The goals of the seminar are
1) oral and written presentation of a substantial research paper on a topic related to the theme of the class. The paper must demonstrate thorough and accurate research skills, precise citations and bibliography according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, a clear argument and logical structure.

2) demonstrated understanding of the historiography of the topic, ie. the different perspectives that historians have taken over time as well as in the present. We develop this sense of historiography through the discussion of readings that we do in common, which are designed to highlight different perspectives. The course assigns a number of
short response papers which are intended to give students the opportunity to discuss the arguments, methods and perspectives of the historians they read.

**Sampling:**
In Fall 2009, 20 students completed the class. Like Theory & Practice, the department now requires history majors to earn at least a C in the class to be able to graduate.

### Guidelines for Assessing Assignments

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<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Inadequate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Identifies and develops main themes with depth and completeness, strong support, and adequate detail. Employs themes, ideas, and principles from course readings &amp; discussions.</td>
<td>Identifies and develops main themes in a vague way, or not as deeply as they might be. Supporting evidence and analyses are lacking in detail or they are unclear. Little use of course ideas or materials.</td>
<td>Identifies and develops main themes poorly or not at all. Analysis is missing, as is supporting evidence. No use or poor use of course ideas or other materials.</td>
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<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td>Solid and imaginative exploration and use of appropriate primary sources, scholarly articles and monographs. Sources build on each other, open new avenues of thought, and establish argument with originality.</td>
<td>Secondary sources only, or inappropriate use of primary sources. Unimaginative but adequate exploration and use of materials.</td>
<td>Too little evidence of any kind to address analytical questions with originality and depth. Heavy reliance on a single source or fragmentary use of secondary sources. Note that any evidence of plagiarism will result in a failing grade.</td>
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<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Uses evidence to argue a point. Asks interesting and novel questions of the evidence. Considers context, contingency, actors’ roles and purposes, and significance of findings. Adds value to evidence. Applies concepts from course. Seeks explanation.</td>
<td>Narrative with some consideration of context and other explanatory factors. Crude or simple application of course ideas, methods, or materials.</td>
<td>Simply accumulates evidence within a narrative that lacks contextualization and other explanatory factors. No use of course ideas, methods, or materials</td>
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<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Organization is unified and coherent. The order and structure of the paper, paragraphs, and sentences are compelling and move the reader along. Transitions are purposeful and clear.</td>
<td>Writing’s logical order and structure is inappropriate and does not advance the paper's goals. Paragraphs, sentences, and/or transitions are sometimes effective but sometimes not.</td>
<td>Lacks clear structure and order. Paragraphs and sentences may be convoluted and difficult to understand, or they may be too choppy. Transitions are abrupt and unclear.</td>
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<td><strong>Convention</strong></td>
<td>Grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and vocabulary usage are correct and appropriate. The tone is consistent and appropriate. Citations are thorough, accurate, and in correct format.</td>
<td>Grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and vocabulary usage contain some flaws that do not impede readability. The tone is inconsistent and/or inappropriate. Citations are accurate but formats are erratic.</td>
<td>Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary usage contain major flaws that impede readability. Citations are missing, and/or they appear in erratic formats.</td>
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Results:

The grades on the final paper:  
On the first draft:  
For the course:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>C+</td>
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The paper grades evaluate the overall quality of the papers and the extent to which they showed progress in the factors outlined in the rubric above. It is notable that the grades on the final paper were significantly better than those on the first draft.

This was a strong group of students who for the most part showed consistent improvement over the course of the semester, moving from preliminary assignments to the final project. Students did a good job constructing papers within the theme of the class; several of the papers were strong enough so that the students were encouraged to try for History honors.

Recurring problems came in students’ development of their ideas and consistently demonstrating historical thinking. The weakest papers lacked analysis of primary sources, relying too heavily on the secondary works of others. Further, despite significant efforts to demonstrate correct grammar, stylistic conventions and correct citation, there were still too many mistakes in the papers.

It is clear that the students, even at the culmination of their History Major, need to be reminded of the key elements of historical thinking, research, and writing. Often the most difficult concept for them is historiography – the ways that historians have written about a topic over time. In requiring them to incorporate a historiographical section in their final papers, we force them to think about how their arguments and methods fit within the broader discipline of history and that writing about their topics is itself historical.

For the most part, the fall 2009 students were enthusiastic participants in the History Seminar and were able to clearly articulate their research arguments and findings in oral presentations.

At the end of the Seminar, we asked students to evaluate their required history courses (Theory and Practice of History, and the Seminar) and the major as a whole. Some useful comments (which also suggest the thoughtfulness of the students in this particular course):

“I felt that this course was the only research-based course that challenged me. I think the history department would benefit from having all courses introduce research techniques.”
“The research process was a great experience . . . I was never required to do a research paper in any of my other classes. It would be helpful if we had a bit more experience with that. Theory and Practice was an important stepping stone for this class. Without it I feel I would have been lost.”

“I was able to apply tools I’ve learned over the last 3 years. I really liked Theory and Practice as an introduction. I think that emphasizing historical research papers in every upper-division history class would also be good preparation.”

“[The seminar] was, appropriately, a lot of work, but I felt relatively confident in putting together all the skills that I have accumulated as a history major.”

“I feel I have matured as a writer and a historian. . . . Everything I learned in Theory and Practice I was able to apply to this course! As a history major, I feel that I am better prepared than most when it comes to thinking objectively and writing original works.”

“A research paper this large wouldn’t have been as daunting, I don’t think, if I was more familiar with slightly bigger research projects in some other classes.”

“Except for Theory and Seminar, other classes didn’t stress strictly correct citation and biblio format. Would help if all history courses re-emphasized. I felt like I was re-learning some theory stuff.”

“I really loved [the seminar]. The process made me remember WHY I chose to focus in history. I feel a sense of accomplishment looking back on the semester and paper.”

“My history major was the best thing to happen to me. My education has completely transformed my outlook on the world, and expanded my mind beyond what I thought capable.”

“I believe that Theory helped to get you ready to take this class, but a lot of my history classes don’t seem to flow together much.”

**Feedback loop:**

It is clear both from our assessment of student work and the comments of students that there are ways that we can improve the major. In spring 2010, we conducted a series of discussions – first among the department’s executive committee, and then two meetings of the whole department – to work on our curriculum structure. In particular, we are concerned that our undergraduate courses reinforce at different levels the skills that students learn in Theory and Practice. We do find that students tend to forget what they learned in Theory and Practice, and have to learn it somewhat anew at the beginning of the History Seminar.

As a result of our curriculum discussions, we have created guidelines for clearer and more thorough syllabi (adopting in principle the CLAS syllabus template), as well as
expectations for the amount of writing our courses should contain (no less than 50% formal writing, in essay exams or papers), and participation (no more than 20% in classes larger than 25 students). This is in response to concerns among both faculty members and our students that we need more consistency across our courses. We agreed that ALL History courses must include:

- Discussion of what history is, how to think historically, and what historians do
- Work with primary sources in their historical context
- Discussion of the relationships between primary and secondary sources
- Practice making an historical argument
- Assessment and development of writing skills

**GRADUATE PROGRAM**

The History department graduate program is quite complicated, although we have simplified it greatly over the course of this year, based largely on suggestions from our external program reviewers in 2008. We have about 85 graduate students in the History MA program. These students fall roughly into three categories: teachers or teachers-in-training coming for additional content education; students planning careers in public history and/or historic preservation; and students simply coming back to pursue their own particular interests.

We also have students coming from the School of Education. These are students earning MA degrees in Curriculum and Instruction with a Social Studies focus. They take some courses in CLAS, especially in History and some from SEHD, but they get all their advising from the History department and do their final projects under our supervision.

Our students use their History MAs in numerous ways. We have very few students who continue on to PhD programs, maybe a single student each year. We have many teachers whose MA degrees allow them to receive larger salaries; our teachers-in-training are better served on the job market with an MA. Our Public History program places students in a variety of positions, including in the National Park Service, local museums, Colorado Historical Society, Denver Public Library, as well as private archival work and research and writing. Some of our graduates teach at the community college level and some get adjunct positions at area schools.

Because of our different student populations, assessment is difficult. Apart from grades in individual courses, we have two key places where we can capture student outcomes. All History graduate students are required to take at least one research seminar; and all History students are required to take comprehensive examinations. Some students also complete a final project or MA thesis; however, because of the variety of curriculum projects/theses, it is difficult to have a single standard assessment. All History MA students must take both written and oral exams. The SEHD students do a curriculum project but are not required to do comps.
In AY 2009-2010, sixteen students took their comprehensive exams; and seven students defended theses (some students completed comps and theses in this same academic year.) We have two students rewriting theses after unsuccessful defenses, and have had one student retake comps this year. Twelve students have graduated with the MA degree.

In response to the external review suggestion in 2008, we implemented major changes to our graduate program this year, with the goal of streamlining our offerings and processes. Instead of multiple possible major fields, we now have four: US, Europe, Global, and Public History. Students choose one of these majors, a concentration within the major, and a minor field.

In response to concerns from both our students and our faculty, we have systematized our advising process for graduate students, requiring students to meet with the graduate advisor at multiple points, and requiring students to sign a check list indicating their understanding of expectations upon their admission. It is our hope that these new requirements will make students more aware of what they need to do to navigate the program, as well as to create standards for faculty to adhere to.

We are also limiting the number of students we admit to the program, which has been facilitated by creating firm deadlines for spring and fall admissions, instead of rolling admissions. We also have instituted a Graduate Studies Committee to assist the Graduate Advisor with admissions and issues of curriculum. We have significantly limited our students’ ability to take independent studies, especially for their research requirements. All our students are required to take research seminar classes, and we feel that the seminar experience is a central aspect of their graduate studies. It is hard for the department to oversee the consistency of experience when students are taking their requirements as independent studies.

We are continuing to work on student success in comprehensive exams. We have regularized the exam process, allowing students to take their exams during set periods in the spring and fall semesters. We are working to enforce some of our existing processes, such as plans of study and regular meetings with advisors. Comprehensive exams still demonstrate that standards vary widely across the graduate faculty. Additionally, because our graduate students have such complicated lives – very few of them attending school full time – it is hard for us to maintain consistency across their programs.

Our graduate theses also show that we need to implement more check-points for students during the process. We have had several students arrive at the time for the thesis defenses, with faculty members not satisfied with the products. One idea that we have is to institute formal proposals, where students write up their basic thesis plan and meet with all the members of their thesis committee before getting too far into the project.