

Review of the B.A. Program in History Sonoma State University

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On September 22, 2020, I met with the faculty of the History Department at Sonoma State via Zoom. Before meeting with the faculty, I read through the department's self-study and looked through the department's website and web resources to understand the structure of the curriculum and the co-curricular activities of the department. On the 22nd, I met with the department chair, Prof. Steve Estes, as well as Profs. Stephen Bittner, Samuel Cohen, Mary Halavais, Michelle Jolly, and Kathleen Noonan. I observed a session of Prof. Noonan's HIST 251, and I also met with Dean Troi Carleton and AVP of Academic Affairs Stacey Bosick.

Strengths and Benefits

I heartily agree with the statement from the self-study that "the program's strengths lie in the quality and conscientiousness of their faculty..." (22). Despite crises including three major wildfire seasons and the COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty of the History Department are active scholars and dedicated educators and have created a high-quality, rigorous curriculum that equips students to be actively-engaged and critically-conscious global citizens who are ready for their careers and connected to their community.

In terms of scholarship, the faculty maintain a high level of production despite limited resources. Three faculty members produced post-tenure monographs during the review period, one of which was supported by an NEH grant (Prof. Bittner's *Whites and Reds: Wine in the Lands of Tsar and Commissar*), and both tenure-line and NTT faculty produced articles, book chapters, and reviews for important journals in their fields and gave presentations at major conferences. It is important for the university to recognize, value, and support their active scholars, support which should take a variety of forms. Scholarship absolutely needs direct support in the form of grant money and release time in order to thrive, but faculty also need a community structured around a culture of research and a sense that the university values their scholarship. The self-study describes lunchtime workshops and webinars as missing what faculty really need, but a combined approach of direct support and community-building would help foster a stronger university culture of valuing research and scholarship.

The department has also distinguished itself in terms of curricular innovation. The Sophomore Year Experience is an amazing and innovative program, and Prof. Jolly should be lauded for her creativity as its Faculty Coordinator. The SYE provides support at a crucial time in a student's career, as they are moving from their first year into their majors, and engages them in research and creative activity, a high-impact teaching practice. This program is unique and effective, and provides a model for other universities.

Two certificate programs further provide new opportunities for motivated students. The Certificate in Public History, created by Prof. Estes, prepares students for public history careers. It also strengthens the connections between the students and their community, as they participate in projects or internships that directly impact the community in which they live. It would be great

to see this focus on public history expand. Prof. Estes talked about a possible public history project to do an oral history of Black Lives Matter in Sonoma County, either in conjunction with the Public History Certificate and/or involving the McNair Scholars. This would be a fantastic project that would bring together undergraduate research, connection to community, and career readiness. The Dual Language Historical Research Certificate, developed by Prof. Bittner, will probably serve a more limited number of students, but will provide recognition and support for high-achieving students who want the additional intellectual challenge of conducting research in a language other than English.

Within the curriculum, the department is to be applauded for the way that it scaffolds skill-building throughout the program. Many programs have a methods course that students take in the junior year, to prepare them for their senior research seminar. Though HIST 391 is still taught, it is only recommended rather than required because of difficulties in staffing and running enough sections of the course. The faculty have instead worked together to embed the development of the necessary skills throughout the curriculum, so that students are prepared for their senior seminar during their regular courses. They report that this has been largely successful, which signifies a high level of cooperation and intentional curricular design. One faculty member described the department's pedagogical practice as the "handcrafting of students", and this sort of care for curriculum and pedagogy is clear in all that they do.

The life of the department is vibrant with co-curricular activities. The student journal, *The History Journal at Sonoma State University*, is high quality and provides students with recognition for their scholarship as well as career development in the form of editing and publishing experience. The current issue will also provide a valuable primary source in the form of student experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. History students have also reinvigorated the History Society, and the department hosts a chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the History Honors Society. The department also hosts events for graduating seniors, for graduate and prospective graduate students, outside speakers, and alumni/ae. The alumni/ae events are important because they provide a model for students of pathways after college and create connections for graduating students. The History Department has successful alumni/ae in a variety of career tracks, from teachers and professors to legal professionals to tech employees at Google and Facebook. The department shares in their success and is smart in how they bring them back to talk with their students.

Challenges and Weaknesses

As a fourteen-year faculty member of the CSU, I know both how ubiquitous and unwelcome is a call by external reviewers for more faculty hiring, especially in this current budget situation. In this case, however, the need is dire. All of the seven tenured/tenure-track members of the History Department are from fields in US and European History. In a time when universities are committing to a focus on racial justice and curricular decolonization, it is unacceptable for a history department of any size to have no T/TT representation of the Global South. Redistributing lecturer faculty to cover courses where possible may help to provide this course material to students, but does not demonstrate the same level of commitment as a tenure-track hire and does not provide for advanced undergraduate or graduate study of those fields. A

tenure-track hire in a field of the Global South would also make sense in terms of strategic enrollment, because it would attract more students to the major, minor, and graduate programs. It may also pay dividends in the form of attracting a more diverse group of history majors and in closing equity gaps among students.

Alongside history departments across the country, Sonoma State faces the challenge of declining numbers of majors. We are all hit by this trend, possibly fueled by the false belief that a History major is not “practical” or by outdated popular impressions of what History courses are like. The challenge that faces all of us is how to counteract this trend and how to attract more students. Sonoma State’s department is already starting to act, by creating the new certificate programs and its involvement in the Sophomore Year Experience, and by emphasizing connection to career through alumni/ae events and internships. Expanding these initiatives, especially the Public History focus, internships, and undergraduate research are possible ways to push back against this trend. Creating a 4+1 degree path with cognate fields, such as Museum Studies or a Single-Subject Teaching Credential may also help with this challenge.

In my meetings with the faculty, they also reported inadequacies in library resources. No one expects that the library would be able to house faculty-level research, but they reported difficulties in finding library resources that would support their teaching or would adequately support student research. Key journals in their fields (like *The Journal of Modern History*) were unavailable, and one faculty member described using their daughter’s JSTOR account from another institution for class material because it was more complete than her SSU faculty account. Everyone is pragmatic about what is possible with limited resources, but if they are going to promote undergraduate research, they need adequate library resources to support student work.

Recommendations

1. The most important recommendation to the administration from my investigations are that there is a dire need for a tenure-track hire in the Global South, probably most urgently in Latin American History. Realistically, the department lacks crucial coverage of many world areas, and perhaps could redistribute NTT faculty to cover some if such a redistribution did not compromise their ability to serve the US History General Education requirement. But it is a terrible message for the university to send right now for the History Department to have tenure-line faculty only in the history of the United States and Europe. A hire in the Global South would also make strategic enrollment sense, as it would increase interest and enrollment in the major and may work to reduce equity gaps.
2. I also recommend that the college or university devote energy and resources to Professional Development. This does not all have to take the form of grants and release time, though those both are crucial to an active research agenda. It would be best to invest both in direct research support and in community-building enterprises to recognize faculty research and to foster a culture of research on campus. If the funding does not currently exist for such activities, it would be a great focus for fundraising and development.

3. I recommend that the department expand on their Public History focus. The certificate is a great indication of future directions, and expanding on it through internships, Community Service Learning, and projects like the oral history of Black Lives Matter in Sonoma County will help strengthen the connection of SSU students to their community, provide key career skills, and attract students to the major.
4. I would recommend that the department look into creating 4+1 programs, not only with their own M.A. program, but also with cognate fields (Cultural Resources Management and Teaching Credential are two possibilities). This would help emphasize connections to careers and attract majors to the department.
5. I would recommend that the department expand their focus on undergraduate research. UR doesn't always have to take the form of students working as research assistants on faculty projects, though when possible, those are moments of real impact in students' lives. UR can also be embedded in the curriculum, and the department and college can take steps to recognize, name, and highlight the research that students already do as a key part of the History major. Undergraduate research is a high-impact teaching practice, and can make the difference both in challenging an advanced student and in retaining a struggling student. In their classes and in their connection with the Sophomore Year Experience, the History Department already does work in this area, but it would be productive to work with other departments to support and promote undergraduate research in the College.