

Review of the Graduate Program (M.A.) in History Sonoma State University

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On September 15, I "visited" Sonoma State via Zoom to review the History Department's M.A. program. In preparation I studied the department's nine-page self-study, its learning outcomes, and its record of degrees granted and matriculations without degrees since 2012. During my "visit" I met with members of the department with responsibility for the program, department chair Steve Estes, graduate coordinator Michelle Jolly, assessment coordinator Stephen Bittner, and former graduate coordinator Kathleen Noonan; with Dean of Social Sciences Troi Carleton; with AVP for Academic Affairs Stacey Bosick; and with students in Prof. Estes' History 500 seminar, joined by some other recent graduates.

My overall assessment of the program is a positive one. The program is intelligently structured and cleverly uses the department's limited resources to provide a well-rounded history education along with opportunities for students to specialize in a surprisingly broad range of sub-fields at remarkably little financial cost to the university. Although the department's self-study recognized that "declining enrollments and degree conferrals are the most serious challenges facing the MA program," I was happy to learn that this Fall saw the largest new "class" of enrollees, with eight of nine of those admitted enrolling. This undoubtedly reflects the counter-cyclical nature of enrollment in graduate programs like History seen at almost all similar institutions. When economic activity declines, people tend to go back to school to improve their credentials -- or, perhaps, simply the quality of their lives. While the department will need to consider ways to stabilize this growth and expand its offerings -- suggestions on how best to do so will follow in this report -- the program is in little to no danger of failing. Indeed, properly staffed it should continue as a significant asset to Sonoma State and the north bay communities it serves.

In what follows I will outline, first, the program's strengths and the benefits it brings to the university and the community; second, its challenges and weaknesses; and third, recommendations for improvement. Rather than regurgitating information found in the self-study -- which I found thorough, accurate, and helpful -- these comments should be seen as supplementing that report.

Strengths and Benefits

Perhaps the most revealing part of my visit was my exchanges with graduate students, which came at the end of the day and lasted for about an hour. Pretty much unanimously the students praised the program and, in particular, the faculty they work with, pointing to a series of strengths. The program is appropriately "rigorous," several declared. Its small size and intimate connection with faculty is appealing. One student declared that entering the program was "one of the best decisions I have made." The department, she noted, provided her not only with a rigorous education but with "a place in a community." One high school teacher in the program praised the faculty for being "very accommodating" and going out of their way to make the program fit his needs.

It was clear from all my conversations that the History M.A. program provides benefits to both the university and the broader community. Several graduate students received their B.A.s from SSU and were pleased to be able to continue their education there. Some were interested in a PhD but did not feel as yet adequately prepared. Others were teachers looking to upgrade their qualifications and yet others were simply motivated by enrichment concerns. This struck me as similar to the motivations of students in other northern California CSU History M.A. programs. However, although many of these students could have entered programs at SF State or at CSU East Bay, they noted, first, the geographic accessibility of Sonoma State, but also their sense -- and in the case of those who were undergrads at SSU their experience -- that the faculty were especially welcoming, attentive, and even inspiring.

The department's self-study hits the nail on the head when it declares that the program "fulfills important and regional state needs."

Challenges and Weaknesses

In addition to sustaining enrollment during periods in which demand for all such programs may weaken, the biggest challenge facing the department will be its ability to offer the necessary range of courses both to attract students and ensure the quality of the education they receive. This is undoubtedly a problem facing the undergraduate program as well. To put it bluntly, the SSU History department is significantly understaffed. As one who taught in the CSU for 25 years, served as a department chair, and in governance, I am painfully aware of the funding challenges faced by SSU and the entire CSU system. I recognize that new faculty lines often must follow enrollment growth and that even when there is such growth funding may still be limited, a problem and challenge that cannot, of course, be addressed at the department level. That said, however, without an adequate number of full-time instructors, reflecting a sufficiently broad range of sub-fields, no History program, graduate or undergraduate, will be able to attract and properly serve students. And that should be a major concern for the

university, both because it is difficult to imagine a liberal arts university like SSU without a fully healthy History program, but also because such programs -- including, perhaps especially, the History M.A. program -- are not expensive and, in a healthy university, can balance the higher costs associated with programs in STEM and the professions.

Currently, despite heroic efforts by the department's faculty, including by its adjuncts, the SSU History department is perilously close to the point at which the survival of its programs, both the M.A. and B.A. programs, will be threatened not for lack of interest or enrollment but for an inability to provide the broad education that students deserve. The self-study acknowledges that the department "can offer its undergraduate majors and MA candidates expertise only in American and European history," a weakness it calls "shameful." It is. Specifically, it is little short of criminal that a History department in California, with its large and rapidly growing Latinx and Asian minorities, does not have a single full-time specialist in the history of Latin America or East or South Asia. In my discussions with students several mentioned this as a major weakness and one that no doubt discouraged others from applying to the program. While the intimacy associated with the program's modest size was a major attraction, the students also recognized it as a disadvantage because of the limited choice and diversity of course offerings. One student complained that the department was forced to rely too much on adjuncts, who, he quickly acknowledged, did a fine job but could not be as accessible for informal advising.

Another concern voiced by students was that while the program made room for intern experiences, which several highly valued, the internship program was somewhat haphazard. In many respects this too is a consequence of under-staffing, as a well-run internship program demands faculty time in seeking out potential internship partners and supervising and monitoring internships.

Recommendations

1. My single most important recommendation to the SSU administration is to initiate searches for full-time tenure-track faculty appointments in Latin American and either East or South Asian history *as soon as possible* (which, sadly, owing to the pandemic may be a bit longer than it should be). The M.A. program can survive without such appointments -- indeed, it is likely that M.A. students who *concentrate* in these fields will be few even after they are hired, if only owing to language limitations -- but the overall attractiveness and richness of the program -- indeed of the department as a whole -- will continue to be less than fully adequate without them.

2. The self-study's "plan of action" envisions the development of a public-history track. I wholeheartedly endorse this suggestion and urge the administration to provide the department with resources necessary to implement it. Public history has been important to the sustenance and growth of M.A. programs in similarly situated departments, including my own department at East Bay. The department already has the faculty with skills to initiate and develop such a program, although it might be beneficial to bring in an outside consultant to assist in its creation. (I would recommend my colleague Linda Ivey at CSUEB for such a role.) The department has also suggested that such a program could be developed in cooperation with other departments, notably CRM. I am not in a position to assess either the advisability or feasibility of such intra-campus cooperation, but it could certainly be a useful avenue. In any event, such a program should focus on local needs. Here the role of internships could be key. For example, the county's important wine industry could be a rich source not only of internships but of research projects and theses in public history. I suspect that many small, medium, and even large wineries would be anxious to turn a Sonoma State graduate student loose in their archives in order to craft a company history.

In my discussion with students several expressed interest in such a program, but all emphasized that any public history program should supplement and support, not supplant, the current program's topical and thematic flexibility as well as its emphasis on historical methodologies, appreciation of historical debate and controversy, and focus on the development of critical thinking, writing, and oral communication skills. I agree. In that light, while the development of such a program may well -- and probably in the medium term should -- lead to the hiring of an additional full-time specialist in public history to direct the option, in the near future that should not take precedence over the burning necessity of broadening the department's subject area competence to include full-time faculty in Latin American and Asian histories.

3. The self-study suggests development of a "4+1" path to a History BA/MA, pending direction from the Chancellor's office on how units may be credited in such programs. This seems a reasonable suggestion worth exploring, especially given the significant number of current MA students who did their undergraduate work in History at SSU. It could be a cost-saving measure (as the self-study argues), but also something that could attract new undergraduate majors and help retain for the program undergraduate majors who might otherwise go elsewhere -- SF State, CSUEB, Sac State -- to continue their studies.

4. The self-study also suggests reformulating requirements for students who take a comprehensive exam instead of writing a thesis, noting that such students often take a longer time to earn a degree. Because the option is, according to the self-study,

especially popular among teachers, perhaps consideration should be given to replacing the option -- or creating an additional option -- some sort of teaching project, perhaps a detailed series of lesson plans, to be submitted in lieu of a traditional thesis. CSUEB has had some success with such an option for those MA students who are currently teaching.

In conclusion, let me stress my admiration for the excellent work being done by the SSU History Department. With limited and shrinking resources they have managed to sustain an M.A. program that is clearly serving the needs of the community -- filling a small but important niche, one might say -- and that with modest investment in faculty and some creative thinking has the potential to do quite a bit more. In particular, the development of a public history option as a critical vocationally oriented supplement to the department's already rich traditional History offerings could help extend the program's reach and provide a genuine service to the north bay community. However, despite their near-heroic work the department's faculty cannot be expected to do this alone. Without an expansion of the full-time tenure-track faculty -- and, in particular, without essential faculty in the critical fields (for a public university in California) of Latin America and Asia -- it is difficult to imagine that the department will be able to fully succeed. And such a failure would really be a tragedy. The beauty of history departments in institutions like the CSU is that they provide so much for so little cost. But there are limits and I fear that SSU may be approaching such a limit.