

# Curriculum Review Public Report

Department of History

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Unit Lead: Mark Konnert

Review Team: Lyndsay Campbell, Paul Chastko, Mark Konnert, Ken MacMillan, Glenn Wilkinson

## 1. Context

The Department of History is one of the oldest units in the University, having been founded in 1947, thus predating by decades the existence of an autonomous University of Calgary. The members of the department take undergraduate teaching very seriously, and it shows. Our USRI responses exceed Faculty of Arts averages almost every year at all levels. This strength was also highlighted in our 2 most recent unit reviews (2006 and 2016).

In common with History programs across North America, both enrolments in History courses and numbers of History majors had declined in recent years. Unlike most other History departments, however, we have managed to reverse these declines. Dealing with these declines has led us to take some measures that might otherwise have been indicated by the curriculum review process. For example, in the academic year 2015-16 we eliminated areas of concentration for our majors, which streamlined students' programs considerably. This is no doubt a large part of the explanation for improving rates of retention. In 2012 our 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention rate in History was 63.6%; in 2016 it was 95.2%.

In consultation with the Taylor Institute, we had a frank debate about our grading practices, as History courses had acquired the reputation of being "GPA killers." While our average GPA was only slightly below the Faculty of Arts average, it was considerably harder to earn a grade in the A range. Since then, the gap has narrowed significantly: in 2016 the Faculty average of A grades was 38.4%, while History's was 32.4%. While it is still relatively harder to achieve an A grade in History courses, the disparity has lessened, and it seems likely that non-majors are less likely to shy away from history courses because of their perceived difficulty.

At that time we also decided to devote 0.5 GAT per term to assist students in their research and writing. A senior Ph.D. student, he or she is available for drop-in sessions several times per week and is also available by appointment. Student response to this initiative has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

As a result of these and possibly other factors, the decline has been reversed, and enrolments in our courses have increased by 56% since their nadir in 2015-16. At the same time, the number of majors rebounded, although the decline in their numbers had not been as dramatic as that in overall enrolments. From a high of 330, they had declined to 249 in 2017, but have since increased dramatically. We have every reason to believe that the number of majors will continue to increase commensurately with the increase in enrolments.

The Department of History takes great pride in its successes in undergraduate teaching and learning, and we feel that the overall program is sound and meeting students' needs and aspirations. Thus, we look at the curriculum review process as an opportunity to be more intentional and deliberate regarding our programs, courses, learning outcomes, and assessment models, as well as to identify areas in which we can improve, as indicated by the data supplied by OIA and by student feedback.

## 2. Overview

### *2.1 Program Level Outcomes*

We aspire that our graduates will have the desire, and understand their responsibility, to be active citizens. For example, they should develop a capacity to keep informed about relevant contemporary issues, participate in the political process, display freedom of thought and expression, and be capable of hearing and discerning a variety of viewpoints with empathy and discretion. We further aspire that our graduates will have acquired an enduring historical curiosity as well as the skills that enable them to remain lifelong learners.

By the end of the program:

1. Students will have demonstrated the ability to write a research paper of a length sufficient to allow for mature primary and secondary source-based engagement with a topic of interest and relevance.
2. Students will be able to apply their skills in critical analysis and communication to a variety of oral and written forms.
3. Students will be able to articulate an understanding of and appreciation for cultural diversity across time and space and to situate themselves and their own society in proper historical context.
4. Students will have acquired the ability to formulate appropriate research questions and theses, and to access, analyze, and critique a wide range of relevant primary and secondary sources.
5. Students will have gained an understanding of historiography: that historians' views of the past are mutable and change with time, depending on the historian, his or her own context and perspective, and that a complete and totally factual account of the past is impossible.
6. Students will have acquired an appreciation of the past that includes an understanding of both the uniqueness of the past and how the past continues to shape the present.

## *2.2 Structure of the Program*

Our undergraduate courses cover immense spans, chronologically, geographically, and topically. We offer courses that range chronologically from antiquity through the 21st century. We offer courses in the history of Canada, the United States, Latin America, East Asia, Africa, and Europe, in addition to Atlantic and World History. We offer courses that focus on social history, legal history, political history, military and diplomatic history, religious history, gender history, intellectual and cultural history, and the history of science, to mention only the most prominent topics.

We offer a BA in History, a BA (Honours) in History, a Minor in History, Co-operative degrees in History (both Majors and Honours), and a Concurrent BA in History and Bachelor of Education. At the graduate level, we offer an MA degree (course-based and thesis-based) and a PhD. The Department of History also administers programs in Latin American Studies and Canadian Studies, which do not form part of this Curriculum Review. In addition, history courses form vital parts of other programs in the Faculty of Arts, including: Ancient and Medieval Studies, African Studies, East Asian Studies, Museum and Heritage Studies, International Studies, and Law and Society.

Our programs are unusual among undergraduate programs in the Faculty of Arts, in that they are very flexible by design. Because of the diversity of the historical discipline, there is no single “Introduction to History” first-year course, as there are in many other disciplines. Rather, our first-year courses (excluding History 200, our introductory course for non-majors) strive to introduce students to the discipline of History even while they learn about the history of a particular time, place, or topic. We have only 1 required course for majors: History 300 (The Practice of History), which students are strongly advised to take in their second year. We have deliberately put this course at the 300 level, rather than 200, as we feel it is essential that students have some historical content knowledge before dealing with issues of methodology, historiography, and the philosophy of history. Most of our first-year students arrive at university without having studied history in high school, and throwing them into a methodology course immediately would be counterproductive.

Students are required to successfully complete at least 12 units at the 400 level and 6 units at the 500 level. (History 300 is a prerequisite for all 500-level courses; some courses have other prerequisites as well.) Courses at the 500 level are all seminars, capped at 15 students. We believe that the seminar experience is essential to attaining our program-level outcomes, and are committed to this requirement despite its significant cost in terms of resources. Mastery of many aspects of our PLO’s are really only attainable in the intimacy and immediacy of the seminar environment. This is also the forum in which faculty research specialties are most clearly brought into the classroom, giving students a chance to get “under the hood” with highly-trained specialists.

We also require that students successfully complete 6 units in Canadian history from a list of eligible courses. Knowledge of Canadian history is essential for educating active and engaged citizens, and for achieving our program level outcomes. We further believe that awareness of one's own time and place is central to an informed appreciation of past societies. We also require students to successfully complete 6 units of history before 1850 (from a list of eligible courses). Within these overall parameters, students are free to choose their own courses.<sup>1</sup>

Our program is also unusual in that, except at the 500 level, almost no courses have prerequisites. (A partial exception to this is History 300, which will as of next year have as a prerequisite any 200-level history course, excluding History 200.) This allows students a great deal of flexibility in designing their own programs, and allows non-majors to select from a broad selection of courses to take as options. This does, however, present some concerns, the resolution of which lies behind several of our guiding questions. Our rates of DFW (grades of D, F, or withdrawal) are somewhat higher than for the Faculty of Arts at large, and this difference is especially noticeable at the 400 level. It is likely that non-majors taking these courses as options have not benefited from the cumulative building of skills at the lower levels, and are either discouraged and withdraw, or achieve sub-optimal grades.

Students in the BA (Honours) program must complete all the requirements of the Majors program. In addition, they must take History 496 (Historical Methods and Philosophies of History), a seminar restricted to Honours students, as well as History 597, a directed readings course with their Honours advisor in their area of research, and History 598. This last course involves both the Honours essay and periodic meetings with other Honours students and the Honours advisor. Honours students must also satisfy a second language requirement.

For the Minor in History, there are no required courses, although History 300 is strongly recommended. Students must successfully complete at least 18 units (3 FCE) at the 300 level or above, of which a minimum of 3 units (0.5 FCE) must be at the 400 or 500 level.

### **3. Guiding Questions and Findings**

Analysis of data from all sources (student input, curriculum mapping, and institutional sources) leads us to the following findings regarding our guiding questions:

1. Are students acquiring the appropriate skills and knowledge at the appropriate time(s) in their studies? Are we properly scaffolding learning to become more complex over time? How specific and explicit should be we regarding learning outcomes of courses at different levels?
  - Analysis of curriculum mapping data shows that by and large we do a good job of scaffolding learning over the duration of our program. With several exceptions, our

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2015-16, we required students to declare primary and secondary areas of concentration. Over time, administering these concentrations became extremely complex, and many students were having difficulty meeting these requirements, which had adverse effects on retention and time to completion.

course outcomes align with our PLO's at the Novice level at the 200 level. At the 300 level, we see primarily Developing level. At the 400 level, we see primarily Developing with some Mastery. At the 500 level, we see about a 50/50 split between Developing and Mastery. In their feedback, students did express a desire for greater consistency of workload and expectations across the different levels of courses. Students also felt that at least some of the components of History 300 would have been helpful at the 200 level.

- In response to this data, the department will undertake to establish more explicit guidelines as to expectations and demands of courses at different levels to ensure greater consistency and more equal progression in complexity. In regard to incorporating elements of History 300 in our 200-level courses, we will explore 2 different approaches. One is to establish a common online module that all students in 200-level courses must complete on a pass/fail basis. This would be a portable credential so that students need complete it only once. This might also be required of non-history majors at all levels, thereby providing part of the solution to Guiding Question #2 below. The other approach is to ensure that our 200-level courses (and their stated learning outcomes) do not require the skills and knowledge that led students to this observation in the first place. This might involve encouraging methods of assessment that align with our PLOs and expectations for Novice skills development, but that do not require capacity in historiography or historical methodology.
2. Since large numbers of students in our classes are not history majors, are there ways in which we can impart to these students some of progressive skill-building that we want our majors to gain?
- This question was driven by our relatively higher rates of DFW, especially at the 400 level. Although there is no significant difference in GPA between majors and non-majors, it seems likely that some students are deterred from taking our courses as options because of the writing assignments. Most instructors make good-faith efforts to accommodate non-majors, either through extra-curricular workshops, or in-class discussion of research methods, writing, and argumentation. For the past number of years, the department has assigned an advanced PhD student to hold twice-weekly drop-in sessions to assist students with their writing. In the past, we also held term paper writing workshops led by a faculty member, a practice that we will re-establish. In addition, the History librarian has offered considerable support to students by offering weekly drop-in sessions in the department.
  - In student consultation, it also became apparent that many students are not aware of the various resources to assist them. Students suggested a dedicated D2L shell for students enrolled in History courses as the best way to communicate to them the various opportunities for assistance. Students also expressed a strong desire for more explicit guidelines and rubrics for assignments. Frustration was expressed that different instructors expect different things in assignments that are nominally similar, and that standards and expectations should be made more explicit. While many of our instructors use rubrics, and provide them in advance to students so that they are aware of expectations and can self-assess their work before

submission, many do not use these instruments or offer them in advance. Because transparent and explicit standards and rubrics form an essential of current best practices on assessment in the teaching and learning literature, we must strive to do better in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

- It is also evident that there is greater scope for scaffolding assignments within courses. Breaking a longer assignment down into several shorter and simpler components would help non-majors (and majors as well) in researching and writing a longer assignment. The challenge, as always, is to accomplish this without imposing an overly burdensome workload on instructors.

3. To what extent and in what ways should we diversify assignments and grading in ways that give students every opportunity for success in our courses?

- It appears that there is considerable scope for us to diversify our assignments, not primarily in terms of topics but rather in nature. In their feedback, students were clear that they find some choice in assignments very attractive. They also indicated that having the choice between one larger assignment and several smaller ones is also appealing. The challenge is how to implement these strategies without adding unduly to instructors' workloads. Effecting changes such as these is aligned with current thinking about assessment as "culture shift that moves away from focusing on evaluating student performance in isolation to evaluating student learning as part of a comprehensive design to support student learning."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, increased scaffolding and diversity of assignment types would fulfill the principle that "assessment is a developmental and sustainable process that fosters self-regulated learning, academic integrity and the ability for students to be life-long learners."<sup>4</sup> In the teaching and literature, there is clear support more frequent and shorter assignments as well as for some degree of choice in assignments.

4. Is the Honours program designed and promoted in ways that optimize its attractiveness to potential students?

- Over the past several years, we revised our Honours program in ways that made its completion simpler and more attainable. These changes were only fully implemented for academic year 2019-20, so it is premature to assess their impact. Nevertheless, we recognize that we need to be better at promoting it to interested students. In the course of student consultations, it became evident that students lacked information about the program. They suggested several solutions, all of which will be implemented as soon as possible. We will hold information sessions for interested students with faculty and current honours

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<sup>2</sup> *Guiding Principles for Assessment*, Taylor Institute Guide Series, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Guiding Principles for Assessment*, Taylor Institute Guide Series, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, pp. 5- 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Guiding Principles for Assessment*, Taylor Institute Guide Series, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, p. 6.

students. We will provide instructors in all 200-level and 300-level courses with an informational slide to be presented in class and on D2L. We will also make the Honours program more prominent on our website.

- In addition, it is apparent that because students do not require an Honours degree in order to move into more advanced programs (such as graduate school, teacher education, or law, the direction in which many of our majors head), students are not sure what value the program adds to their degree. Because it is one of our PLOs that students with achieve Mastery in producing a thoughtful, fully-developed research papers using primary and secondary sources — which is the *sine qua non* of the Honours program — this is a point that will be emphasized to prospective Honours students.
5. To what extent are course readings and other materials that we assign required for, or supplemental to, student learning? Is the purpose of all reading material made clear to students and consistent with course outcomes?
- The primary data source for answering this question was student consultation. Across the various forums, students were remarkably consistent in their input. They don't mind spending money on books (within reasonable limits), but they expect that if a book is listed as required that it actually be incorporated into assessments in meaningful ways. If a book is relevant as background, it can be listed as recommended rather than required. However, consistent with University expectations regarding the use of learning resources, as a department we need to recognize that sources are now available in ways that do not place financial burdens on students. Many resources are available as e-books through the library, can be rented for considerably less money than purchasing them, or are otherwise available as open educational resources (OERs).
6. How can we best employ collaborative learning strategies in our courses?
- The National Survey of Student Engagement identified collaborative learning as an apparent deficit in our courses. However, the four questions upon which this was based do not capture the primary mode of collaborative learning employed in our courses: class discussion. This method is used extensively in our 500- level courses, which are all small seminars of 15 students or fewer. In these seminars, it is also common for students to present on primary and secondary sources to their peers, effectively teaching the material to the class in a highly collaborative format. Many instructors also employ discussion or other collaborative learning strategies in their courses at lower levels. In fact, "Discussion" was the third most employed Teaching and Learning Activity (after "Lecture or presentation," "Readings," and "Writing projects"). More than half of the courses mapped (29 of 45) employed discussion as a TLA.
  - In their feedback, students were largely united both in their appreciation of collaborative learning, primarily in the form of discussion, and in their dislike of graded group work. This appreciation, however, came with an important caveat. Students felt that discussion was most useful when it came with specific



guidelines and/or questions.

7. How can we increase students' awareness of the skills they have acquired in their education and their applicability to a wide range of careers?

- Our primary data source for answering this question was student input. Students felt that explicit Course Outcomes were valuable in this respect. They also felt that specific exposition and discussion of these skills should (and often does) form a significant part of History 300, but should also be made more explicit in all courses. The desire was also expressed for greater awareness of alumni careers as well as for greater presence of alumni at various events such as orientation.

#### **4. Action Plan**

In sum, the results of the Curriculum Review reveal History programs that are functioning very well overall, as evidenced by burgeoning enrolments, increasing numbers of majors, and Faculty-leading teaching evaluations. In large part, this is due to reforms of the curriculum that took place on our own initiative in 2015-16 prior to the formal curriculum review process. We eliminated the areas of concentration that complicated students' degree progress and had a frank discussion of our grading and assessment practices. The Honours program was streamlined in ways that we hope will make it more attractive to students. Many of the reforms that might have identified by a curriculum review were implemented prior to the formal process.

Nevertheless, we recognize that there are areas in which we can improve and bring our curriculum more into alignment with current best practices identified in the teaching and learning literature. None of the items that follow require calendar changes at this point, as those changes were made several years ago. In response to the Curriculum Review, the Department of History will:

1. Embark on a review of the standards and expectations at different course levels, to ensure that the teaching and learning environment is comparable in all courses at the same level. This will include guidelines as to the number, length, and types of assignments, expectations regarding outside-of-class reading, and ensuring that students are scaffolded into Novice, Developing, and Mastery skills development in a more consistent way across the program. In the future, this may result in some courses being renumbered to better reflect the expectations placed on students.
  - The Department will devote a department meeting to this process in Winter term 2020, so that these guidelines will be in place for Fall 2021.
  - The Department will also revisit the online History Students' Handbook to determine if changes are needed to make it more useful for students.
2. Explore the feasibility of an online methods module to be used in all 200-level courses, or re-examine our pedagogy at the 200-level in ways that will not require these skills. Such an online module may also be useful for non-history students in

courses at higher levels.

- The Department will decide in Winter term 2020 which avenue it will pursue. If it opts for the online module, we will have this in place for Fall 2020. If the other option is chosen, it will form part of the guidelines arising from item #1.
3. Explore methods of collaborative learning to enhance students' learning activities that go beyond in-class discussion, as valuable as that is. In this, we will utilize the resources available to us through the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning.
    - At the end of the Winter 2020 term, we will hold a half-day retreat with facilitator(s) from the Taylor Institute to share practices and ideas around collaborative learning.
  4. Discuss ways in which we can adjust our assessment practices to bring them into greater conformity with the principles of assessment. These may include allowing students a degree of choice in the nature of assignments, breaking bigger and more complex assignments down into smaller and more manageable pieces, or substituting several shorter assignments for one longer one. Once more, we would welcome the resources and assistance available to us through the Taylor Institute. Having said that, the Department of History remains absolutely committed to the notion that History is above all a written discipline and that any authentic History program will emphasize the written word. This could mean that some students will forgo History courses in favour of disciplines in which assessment relies more on content mastery (which is not central to the discipline) than on critical engagement with the past (which is History's *raison d'être*). We must also include in our course outlines more specific and explicit explanations of and guidelines for assignments. To this end, our department manager has been working to establish a template or course outlines.
    - At the end of the Winter 2020 term, we will hold a half-day retreat with facilitator(s) from the Taylor Institute to share practices and ideas around alternative forms of assessment.
  5. Reinstate the practice of conducting research and writing workshops available for students in all our courses, as a supplement to the drop-in sessions offered by the PhD writing assistant and the History librarian.
    - This can be implemented immediately.
  6. Establish a History-specific D2L shell for all students in our courses. This will assist in communication with students in advertising workshops and other forms of assistance.
    - This can be implemented immediately.
  7. To promote our Honours program, we will heighten its prominence on our website,

hold annual information sessions for interested students, and provide instructors with an informational slide to be used in their classes.

- This can be implemented immediately.

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<sup>2</sup> *Guiding Principles for Assessment*, Taylor Institute Guide Series, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, pp. 5-6.

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