

History Department

Annual Assessment, Fall 2022

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## **Year of Reflection**

For this year's annual assessment report, we have decided to undergo a year of reflection to allow us to better understand what we have learned from past yearly assessment practices and results, what has worked and what has not, and how we may want to move forward in aligning our teaching with our student learning goals. Below we provide a short overview of the questions we reflected on, what we have done in regards to assessment in the past five years (2017-2022), and the summary of our conversations regarding assessment. While we will conclude with some thoughts on where the department would like to focus our energy in the next few years, however, we do not provide a detailed plan as to what comes next.

A little context is in order first. During the past five years the department—like the world—has been faced with unprecedented obstacles. The outbreak of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 led to a national lockdown, the rapid transition to online and remote instruction, and personal, institutional, national, and global stress. Overnight students and faculty were forced to learn new technologies to teach and interact, all while worrying about the health of our families, security, political, and social institutions. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement furthered this insecurity. Emotions were high, we all were stressed, depleted, and demoralized, and still we worked to adapt our classes to a Zoom or remote format and showed up to teach. Students were understandably distressed, many disengaged and distracted, and some dealing with mental health issues. Fast-forward to the return to in-person classes in the fall of 2021. Masked and happy to be back together we faced the effects the pandemic: continued distraction and mental health issues, weaker reading, writing and analytical skills, and to top it off, a national narrative about the unimportance of the humanities.

How can we as a department of committed history teachers help our students to understand the relevancy of historical studies? And how can we assess that process in a way that is as painless as possible to the department and to our students?

## **Questions to reflect on**

- 1) What have we learned from the yearly Program Learning Outcome (PLO) assessment of student learning? What did we learn from the assessment of the C2 section of the Core?
- 2) How can we better align our course assignments with our PLOs and assessment practices? Or should we? How can we better use our senior seminar to evaluate student learning? Is there a role for earlier courses, such as HIST 210 Historical Methods, in assessing student learning?

3) How can we begin to assess our History minor students understanding that many finish the minor before their final year and do not take our senior seminar?

### **What we have done and learned thus far**

For the years under review, we used assignments in our senior seminar to assess student learning. An assessment sub-committee was formed and acted as the readers. A rubric was created to score the assignments. The findings were tabulated and shared and discussed with the department. The department chair then wrote the assessment report and submitted it to the CAS dean.

### **2017-2018**

PLO assessed: #3 Think critically and historically about the past.

Method used: See above. One of the raters was the course instructor.

Findings: The majority of our students were more than exceeding our minimum expectations (Adequate).

Rating rubric had 5 goals.

For Goal #1, all papers were scored Adequate or better. 67% were either Sophisticated or Strong.

For Goal #2, 94% of the papers were scored Adequate or better; only 2 papers (6%) were deemed Marginal. 70% were either Sophisticated or Strong.

For Goal #3, all papers were scored Adequate or better. 83% either Sophisticated or Strong.

For Goal #4, 97% of papers were scored Adequate or better; only 1 paper (3%) was deemed marginal. 50% were either Sophisticated or Strong.

For Goal #5, 97% of papers were scored Adequate or better; only 1 paper (3%) was deemed marginal. 65% were either Sophisticated or Strong.

### Lessons Learned:

For previous years, we chose raters who were not the instructors of the courses evaluated. What we learned was that this meant the task was extremely time-consuming for non-specialists in the field, but even considering this, our reviewers did have very similar ratings for each paper. For this year we decided to have the instructor be one of the raters. Our hope was that this would help us to evaluate if an instructor and non-instructor assess student work similarly or if there are wide fluctuations in their assessments. We found that there was more discrepancy this year in terms of how the raters distinguished between Sophisticated and Strong work. We discussed that this might mean that there was a slight instructor bias (which we could expect) or that there might be

divergence in our interpretations of the difference between a Sophisticated and Strong paper. Collectively we think this is to be expected in humanities/qualitative fields as it is sometimes difficult to assess the intangible and/or creative elements of a paper using a rubric.

The department also discussed how much time and effort we devote to assessment. For this AY of 2017-2018 alone, we had the yearly assessment reports (now for major and minor), our Annual Program Review (APR), and Core C2 (being reviewed by the Core Assessment Working Group of the Core Advisory Committee). This added to the workload of the chair and department in general (even those not on the Assessment Committee).

### **2018-2019**

PLO assessed: #4 Understand and appropriately apply historical research methods.

Method used: See above. Raters were the course instructor and one other full-time faculty member.

Findings: Rating rubric had 5 goals.

For Goal #1, 76% of papers were scored Sophisticated or Strong. 94% were Adequate or above.

For Goal #2, 70% of the papers were scored Sophisticated or Strong. 82% were Adequate or above.

For Goal #3, 50% of the papers were scored Sophisticated or Strong. 76% were Adequate or above.

For Goal #4, 47% of the papers were scored Sophisticated or Strong. 76% were Adequate or above.

For Goal #5, 48% of the papers were scored Sophisticated or Strong. 69% were Adequate or above.

The findings for AY 18-19 are consistent with previous years: the overwhelming majority of our graduating seniors are meeting our expectations, with many of them being rated as Sophisticated or Strong in their work. We continue to find that some variation.

Lesson learned: There was a little more variation this year between raters, usually between what they marked as Sophisticated and Strong or Adequate and Marginal. We think this is inherent in assessing such humanities written student work as the context matters. For example, knowing where the student/class started and where they ended up is important. When one of the raters is the instructor, this knowledge may influence their rating. However, this does not mean we want to prohibit the class instructor from acting

as a rater as having someone knowledgeable in the specific field is crucial to understanding what the student learned (and if it was correct). We also discussed having fewer categories as the difference between Sophisticated and Strong can be minimal and hard to distinguish.

## **2019-2020**

PLO assessed: We assessed the oral competency of our graduating seniors in our Fall senior seminar. This directly relates to PLO #5: Craft and present persuasive historical arguments in both **oral** and written form.

Method used: See above. Both raters were not the course instructor. Oral presentations were taped and raters viewed them in digital format. We changed the categories on the rubric to three: Exemplary, Competent, and Developing.

Findings: We found that 75% of the students assessed were rated as exemplary or competent. This is in line with past yearly assessments. Considering the anxiety students have when speaking publicly and being recorded, we are satisfied with these findings. Being that the research was in progress, it is understandable if some students were less confident in their findings.

### Lesson learned:

Both raters found that the quality of the recordings made it very difficult to hear the presentations clearly. Recordings were done by USF's Media Services office. The raters did the best they could with the material provided. It was noted how difficult it is for students to be recorded while presenting their work. The department found they did a good job considering their nervousness.

## **2020-2021**

PLO Assessed: #6 Understand how the practice of history can establish a valuable framework for considering ethical issues in the past and present.

Method Used: See above. Neither rater was the instructor of the course.

Findings: Most papers got inadequate on all measures; both raters agreed that this was not the fault of the students; rather, the instructor had not worded the assignment in a manner that suggested students should engage ethical issues at all. What was interesting to the raters was that some papers did engage with ethical issues sufficiently enough to warrant a competent score while others even received exemplary scores. The reviewers suggested that credit for this went to USF's general curricular orientation toward ethics, which meant that students wandered into ethical terrain on their own, even if the assignment didn't require it of them. Faculty agreed with the raters on this.

### Lessons Learned:

After a thoughtful and engaged discussion, the department agreed that it would be worth working with an instructor more closely in the future to assess a learning outcome. We agreed that the diverse teaching approaches of our faculty members are a strength, and it would be valuable for our department if faculty members could work with the Chair on streamlining assignments in a manner that helped the assessment sub-committee assess learning outcomes. On history and ethics, a majority of faculty felt that historians can help frame ethical debates in valuable ways but it's worth investigating our curriculum in general and the degree to which these outcomes are embedded into it.

### **Core C2 Assessment—May 2020**

As this process was conducted by the Core Assessment Working Group (CAWG) of the Core Advisory Committee, we have not included a detailed discussion of the process, methods, or analysis.

Findings (tabulated by CAWG): None of the C2 criteria met the 70% benchmark of meeting or exceeding expectations, though Criterion #2 came very close. In the debriefing that followed the rating session and in written feedback, faculty raters reported that their largest challenge in assessment was that many work products didn't map well onto the rubric. For most raters, applying the rubric to a research paper, longer essay or essay exam was straightforward. For other types of assignments ranging from multiple choice exams (many submitted without the test key) to weekly reading summaries, the application of the rubric was quite challenging. Indeed, raters also noted that such a wide variety of work products was a hindrance of its own.

Department Response: At first, the department was surprised to find we did not meet the 70% threshold set by CAWG. From the beginning of this process, the department expressed concern with how to adequately assess student learning with only one or two assignments. There is a wide range of assignments in C2 courses (essays, research papers, multiple choice exams, reading reflections, primary source analyses, group projects, presentations, discussions, etc.). The main issue seems to be inconsistency of work products assessed during this process. Finding one assignment that encompasses all the learning outcomes is difficult, if not impossible. There were also concerns about having raters without expertise in the subject of the course assess the student work. This has been an ongoing issue as we do our annual assessment reports as well.

As the report mentions, the raters were given a variety of assignments without the answer keys and instructed to mark the product "Below Expectations" if it did not align with the criteria. At this point there is no way of knowing how many were marked "Below Expectations" because they did not map onto the criteria.

The department has the following suggestions should we undergo this endeavor again:

1. Allow instructors to submit multiple assignments to accurately show student learning on each of the criterion.
2. Allow instructors with expertise in the particular field to be raters.

3. Make sure the raters have the keys/answers to the work product being assessed.
4. Have a category for raters to mark if the assignment does not reflect the criteria (instead of lumping such products with the “Below Expectation” products).

## **Discussion**

Let’s start with our main goal—we want to show students the relevance of history to their lives and society. History and the humanities more broadly have been devalued in recent years. STEM fields are often seen as the only ones providing “useful” skills. We want to emphasize that the skills and tools of the historical discipline prepare students for a plethora of jobs (hence our emphasis on methodology). We are committed to offering students a diversity of thematic, regional, and methodological courses that introduce them to the breadth of the discipline, the variety of ways historians conduct research, and the importance of history to understanding and solving the issues of today.

While the goal of annual assessment reports is to evaluate student learning, the department had a good discussion about how this assessment of student learning relates to how we teach and how we may be able to encourage new modes of engagement that will resonate with our students. This may include digital humanities, training in podcasting or other ways students can interpret/present history, and new assignments that will engage them. This might entail working with the American Historical Association and their toolkit and perhaps seeking support for some training. Basically, how can we adapt our own approaches to further our student learning, and ultimately the goal of inculcating them with an appreciation of history and its relevance to their lives? Related to that, how can we publicize what we do in a way that engages our students and shows the administration the importance and relevance of history?

A key challenge we have had is aligning the student work rated to the specific PLO under consideration. We have usually relied on the senior seminar paper, as it is the culmination of the major courses and all majors must take the senior seminar. However, each seminar is different and the research paper often does not clearly align with our assessment needs. The papers are usually fine examples of historical research and analysis, just maybe not what we “need” for assessment. We discussed other ways to document student learning, perhaps asking students to reflect on the extent to which they feel they have met the learning outcomes through their work in HIST 210 Historical Methods. Rather than only assessing students in the senior seminar, hearing student perspectives on their own learning as they are moving through the major might yield valuable data. All students also must complete HIST 210 so there may be opportunities to use that class to evaluate specific PLOs.

We also discussed our PLO # 6 which focused on history and ethics. USF’s commitment to social justice should emphasize the value of what the past has to teach while upholding present-day commitments to equity and justice. As a department, we are committed to emphasizing the connections between history and ethics. This has been a difficult PLO to assess though. While ethical issues come up in most of our classes for which a historical lens and historical consciousness is necessary, not every class needs to address ethical questions explicitly.

We recognize that students live in a world where they have to think about how to go about their lives ethically when there is racial and gender injustice, and when there are environmental disasters that are a direct cause of human action. We want our history classes to allow them to see how multiple societies—past and present—have thought about ethical issues and to find their own way through these. Key to this is offering a broader viewpoint on ethics than just what’s right and wrong; history classes conceptualize ethics (like everything else) through a lens that cuts across many time periods and cultures.

On a different note, we continue to struggle with assessing our history minors. The minor curriculum is more flexible, meaning very few take the senior seminar and many finish their minor before their final year. Capturing student work is very difficult and time-consuming. In past reports we have asked the CAS deans and assessment directors for specific ways we can provide what is required. We have not yet received concrete, actionable suggestions.

More broadly, as USF considers substantial revisions to the Core curriculum, we hope that our colleagues across the University will recognize the value of historical thinking and what history courses offer our students, most notably for our discipline’s attention to context and complexity, which equip students to understand people and cultures distant from our own, in time, space, and mentality.

## **Addenda**

### History Department Mission

The essence of historical inquiry is, simply put, to study and understand the past. The History Department at the University of San Francisco is a community of scholars and students who seek an informed and critical sense of the past and an awareness of the role of the past in shaping the present. Such an understanding is, we believe, the basis for effective and engaged citizenship in the contemporary world.

We seek to educate our students about the variety of past human experience within a global setting. Toward that end, we offer six regional emphases within the history major, and students elect a single or a double emphasis\* in the histories of Africa, Asia, Europe, the Islamic World, Latin America, and the United States. Our courses similarly cover the span of human history from antiquity to modern times and utilize a range of methodological approaches. History at USF offers both breadth and depth into fields and specializations that reveal the complexity of human societies, past and present.

While we hope to impart a love of history and an appreciation of its value, we also aim to prepare our students for further study and professional development in the many areas in which history majors find employment, including (but not limited to) teaching, law, business, and the public sector. The study of history—with the training it provides in close reading, logical reasoning, careful argumentation, and persuasive writing—is an ideal major to prepare for “the real world.”

*\* In the years since we adopted this Mission Statement, we have since added a Global History emphasis; the department will need to amend our statement accordingly.*

### Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)

The program learning outcomes for the History major are as follows:

1. Understand the breadth and diversity of human experience across time and space
2. Develop a substantive knowledge of range and depth in their area(s) of concentration, whether regional and/or topical/thematic
3. Think critically and historically about the past
4. Understand and appropriately apply historical research methods
5. Craft and present persuasive historical arguments in both oral and written form
6. Understand how the practice of history can establish a valuable framework for considering ethical issues in the past and present

The program learning outcomes for the History minor are a subset of those for the major:

1. Understand the breadth and diversity of human experience across time and space
3. Think critically and historically about the past
5. Craft and present persuasive historical arguments in both oral and written forms
6. Understand how the practice of history can establish a valuable framework for considering ethical issues in the past and present