

**Academic Assessment Report**  
**Department of History**  
**Prepared by Alessandro Brogi, UGSD**  
**JUNE 2019**

As has been customary in our department for the past six years, at the end of this year's two semesters, instructors administered exit surveys to graduating seniors enrolled in all five sections of the HIST 4893 Senior Capstone. Four of those sections were taught by full time faculty, one by a Ph.D. instructor ranking at the lecturer level. The document in this appendix is the template questionnaire given to instructors.

As in the past six years, survey questions were designed to assess the undergraduate program's learning outcomes as stated in the 2015 Academic Assessment Plan. This year, the UGS Director asked only the two faculty members teaching the fall 2018 sections to provide their own evaluation of the feedback received by students – while limiting this assessment to the Director's own evaluation of the spring semester exit surveys. The two main reasons for this selection are

- 1) that the findings in the past years have demonstrated minimal or irrelevant variations in the independently conducted evaluations of three to five classes;
- and 2) external assessment by the UGS director can help gain a more objective perspective, as the current best practice calls for assessment to be done independently of grading.

This year's assessment in part benefits from the use of results and methods adopted in the current academic year, based on the last two years' evaluations of the survey, or Gen Ed classes.

It also recommends further implementation of the new approach now adopted by the **University's General Education Curriculum Core Committee**, and fulfilling the requirements and recommendations from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. In 2018 the Curriculum Core Committee had its new format for learning outcomes and learning indicators approved by the faculty senate for implementation starting in the fall of 2020. Under the headings of six undergraduate learning goals, along with attendant learning outcomes and learning indicators. The proven proficiency in these learning outcomes help us meet our retention and graduation goals, which fulfill our institution's mission of increasing graduation rates, as stated by the Quality Initiative Proposal of 2014.

Specifically, those learning outcomes are set to demonstrate, throughout the students' careers, these five goals (each applicable to different fields of study)

1. Strengthen written, oral, and multimodal communication abilities
2. Build core skills of quantitative literacy
3. Develop a working knowledge of how scholars and artists think and act in fundamental areas of study
4. Expand diversity awareness, intercultural competency, and global learning

5. Demonstrate critical thinking and ethical reasoning.

For the purposes of our capstone seminars – we are interested in the fulfillment of the sixth learning outcome, identified as “added value” learning outcome, which the University’s General Education Curriculum Core Committee thus determined:

**6. Gain the ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply knowledge developed throughout the undergraduate years**

Furthermore the outcome is explained as follows:

**Learning Outcome 6.1: Upon reaching this goal, students will be able to reflect upon and explain how they use the skills and abilities embodied in Goals 1 through 5 in completing an integrative project in their major during their junior or senior year.**

To be certified as meeting this outcome, an assignment must require the student, as part of a credit-bearing course, (a) to produce a significant written paper, as defined by his or her major, or an equivalent project incorporating performance and/or multi-modal text and/or images; and (b) to explain in an additional document of at least 1250 words the degree to which the completed assignment involves at least three of the following sets of skills and abilities:

- a. Written, oral, and/or multimodal communication abilities
- b. Quantitative literacy
- c. Characteristics of inquiry and action in one of the Learning Outcomes under Goal 3 besides the disciplinary area of the major
- d. Diversity awareness and/or intercultural competency
- e. Critical thinking and/or ethical reasoning

So our general question re. the capstone seminars is whether students, by the end of their academic curriculum, attained **at least three** of the above five sets of skills “a through e”

We remain confident that our capstone seminars meet all the above goals, minus “b”, which is specifically addressed by the scientific/quantitative disciplines. This is because the capstone course is designed for seniors and requires them to use the historical knowledge they have gained over the course of their undergraduate experience to more fully demonstrate skills of analysis, synthesis, and integration. They are required to produce a lengthy primary source-based research paper which properly contextualizes the subject matter and deals effectively with differing points of view as expressed in the appropriate historiography, thus also improving the students’ skills in diversity awareness, intercultural competency, and critical thinking.

The Senior Capstone varies in research topical focus from section to section, but each course shares the following activities and promotion of skill sets:

- the development of a testable research question or thesis
- analysis of primary sources
- effective written and oral communication

- production of a lengthy primary research-based paper.

History majors, by the end of their curriculum, are tested to demonstrate proficiency with critical thinking and writing skills, and with historical research methods designed to support well-argued answers to historical questions utilizing primary and secondary sources.

**Stated learning outcomes for the B.A. in History (2015 Academic Assessment Plan-History):**

- Develop knowledge and skills necessary for careers requiring knowledge of history, critical analysis, and research, including teaching, law, and government
- Allow students to pursue their interest in a particular region, time, period, or culture
- Enhance understanding of the role played by diversity in the shaping of human experience
- Train students to communicate effectively in writing
- Train students to communicate effectively in class discussion
- Ensure that students understand the basic mechanics of historical research, including location and retrieval of information, correct usage of primary and secondary materials, and proper citation techniques
- Provide future generations of historians with the training necessary to allow them to continue the pursuit of the above goals

**Capstone seminars general techniques for B.A. in History (2015 Academic Assessment Plan – History)**

- Senior capstone seminar required for all History majors (HIST 4893)
- The Capstone seminar requires majors to conduct original archival research and produce article-length essays (the best of which are published in the *Ozark Historical Review* or occasionally in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*)
- Capstone seminars also introduce majors to the philosophy and methodology of the discipline
- Seniors enrolled in the capstone sections have already taken writing-intensive upper-level courses in their fields of specialization
- In some cases, seniors in capstone have also had previous enrollment in discussion-oriented seminars designed to enhance communication skills

In the following pages the rubric utilized by each instructor of the fall 2018 sections reflects the learning outcomes expected from a Capstone Seminar. The SSLO stands for “Social Sciences Learning Outcomes.” While officially considered a discipline in the “Humanities,” the craft of History research, analysis, and writing, at these methodological levels, reflects a mix of skills that correspond to methodologies adopted in both the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Also, to fulfill the requirement presented by the Undergraduate General Education Core Curriculum program, the discipline of History has been identified with specific learning

indicators and outcomes described as follows (where selected, the learning indicators are marked with “YES” or “NO”):

**3. Develop a working knowledge of how scholars and artists think and act in fundamental areas of study**

**Learning Indicators for Learning Outcome 3.2:**

- a. identify fundamental concepts, structures, themes, and principles of the discipline being introduced
- b. analyze texts and other created artifacts using theories and methods of the discipline
- c. produce a reasonable short essay about the material introduced in the course
- d. interpret texts and other created artifacts within multiple historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts
- e. draw connections among cultural achievements of various groups of people of different ethnicities, religious backgrounds, racial origins, and sexual identities

**Learning Outcome 3.3: Upon reaching this goal, students will be able to articulate and use the basic principles of human interactions—of individuals, groups, and institutions—in a variety of contexts.**

**Learning Indicators for Learning Outcome 3.3:**

- NO a. articulate the key concepts, principles, and overarching themes to a social science discipline.
- NO b. apply social scientific reasoning and techniques.
- YES c. analyze theories, data, and methods of a social science discipline to explain individual, group, and institutional interactions.
- YES d. apply critical thinking and use scientific reasoning to evaluate claims about the social world.
- YES e. integrate and use evidence-based theories to explain various types of human interaction through written and oral communication.

**4. Expand diversity awareness, intercultural competency, and global learning**

**Learning Outcome 4.1: Upon reaching this goal, students will have developed knowledge and abilities aimed at interacting appropriately within intercultural contexts and engaging with complex global systems and issues.**

**Learning Indicators for Learning Outcome 4.1:**

- YES a. examine and interpret an intercultural experience from both one’s own and another’s worldview.

YES b. articulate the essential tenets of a cultural worldview other than one's own through an analysis of its components, including but not limited to history, values, communication styles, politics, economy, and beliefs and practices.

NO c. identify and participate in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication.

YES d. identify and analyze significant global challenges and opportunities in the human and natural world.

YES e. identify and analyze the historical and/or contemporary interrelationships among multiple global cultures.

**Learning Outcome 4.2: Upon reaching this goal, students will have developed familiarity with concepts of diversity in the United States. (Language is tentative, pending further discussions on the U.S. diversity at the university level.)**

**Learning Indicators for Learning Outcome 4.2:**

In an approved course or approved sequence of courses, students will:

YES a. identify and describe examples of historical and present day issues related to diversity and inclusion in the United States.

YES b. explain the historical and/or contemporary construction of difference through analysis of power structures, privilege, and explicit or implicit prejudice, and their roles in fostering discrimination and inequalities in the United States, whether cultural, legal, political, or social.

YES c. describe the advantages of inclusion by identifying and analyzing notions of inclusivity and pathways for cultivating inclusion at all levels of society, whether cultural, legal, political, or social.

YES d. analyze the historical and/or contemporary development of group agency and assess its role in addressing discrimination and inequalities in the United States.

NO e. demonstrate problem-solving and change management skills for achieving social equity.

These are learning outcomes for our General Education classes, and they include our core offerings (US History I and II, World History I and II) in BOTH the Humanities AND the Social Sciences Learning Indicators' groups. By the time the students reach senior level, these learning outcomes are further honed, so that students are able to master all the above learning indicators, adding their ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply knowledge developed throughout the undergraduate years.

The SSLO Rubric used for the Capstone Seminars was thus submitted to our fall 2018 instructors to assess the final research papers, and score them as follows:

Department of History Learning Outcomes Scoring Rubric

Competency	Excellent Mastery	Good Mastery	Some Mastery	Minimal Mastery	No Mastery
Historical Inquiry Detail and Contextualization (SSLO1)	The essay frames a significant historical question that is properly and consciously contextualized, with clear knowledge of the material, mastery of detail and periodization, while also providing a well-learned original insight	The essay frames question and the student makes an effort to explain its significance, with accurate periodization, and minimal flaws in either contextualization or detail. It demonstrates learning adding limited personal insight	The question is not framed clearly, and the student shows limited understanding of context, periodization, or logic. Significant flaws in or neglect of detail. Very limited, or derivative insight backed up by some learning.	No discernible understanding of the historical question. Unclear context and/or periodization. Severe flaws in detail. No personal insight or insight not derived by learning	The essay avoids the question. No information or very scattered information retained
Sources (SSLO2)	Student uses a wide range of sources, from lecture notes to course readings, to other sources and literature, as assigned by the instructor (scholarly databases may be included). All major works on the topic are addressed. Primary sources are clearly referenced	Good use of sources online or on paper. Some of the major works on the topic are missing. Most material is from the reading assignments in class. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is almost consistently clear	Limited use of sources, and all those that are used are from the assigned readings for class. Major works on the topic are missing. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is unclear	Very little evidence that the student checked a sufficient number of sources, primary, secondary, or from databases. Main sources on the topic unknown	No use of sources, or highly inaccurate use of only one or two. No knowledge of the distinction between primary and secondary sources
Critical Evaluation of sources (SSLO3)	Student demonstrates careful reading and thorough assessment of assigned primary sources and secondary literature, placing ideas and conflicting interpretations into perspective. The essay offers an original point of view within the historiographical debate	Demonstrates knowledge and adequate analysis of the historiographical debate, from at least a selected number of sources. An interpretation is offered, though not thoroughly consistent with the analyzed sources	Knowledge and accurate analysis of at least two interpretations. The personal interpretive analysis is weak though.	Little and/or flawed analysis of sources. No interpretive point of view offered	No analysis of sources, or awareness of interpretive differences

<p>Argument and Organization (SSLO4)</p>	<p>The student develops and defends a clear argument, backed by evidence that engages research material, with primary sources also analyzed in an original and intentional way. The essay has a clear introduction, logical passages in argument, and supporting evidence. A conclusion brings everything together, also addressing broad implications</p>	<p>There's an argument, though not always clearly stated. All material is engaged, though the organization of the paper shows some flaws. It may show little evidence of an original interpretation of primary sources. The conclusion is adequate, though it misses some parts of the argument, and does not address broad implications</p>	<p>Little argument, even though the student attempts to make one, which is not followed up throughout the essay. Poor organization or engagement with research material. The conclusion is vague at best, absent at worst</p>	<p>No articulation of an argument. Poor or no knowledge of research material. No discernible organization or conclusion</p>	<p>No argument, no knowledge</p>
<p>Research Techniques (SSLO5)</p>	<p>Student consciously employs verification strategies as needed, demonstrates how research was conducted, and properly annotates all material. The organization is clear, showing how one source is logically followed by the next</p>	<p>Student employs some verification strategies. Demonstration of research and annotations is not always consistent. The organization of sources is adequate though not consistently logical</p>	<p>Little verification of sources. The essay shows little or no evidence of how research was conducted, or distinction among sources. The annotation is poor or missing. The ensuing argument is spotty</p>	<p>No verification of sources. Some sources are cited, but in random way. No annotations. No discernible argument</p>	<p>No sources, no annotations</p>
<p>Writing Style (SSLO6)</p>	<p>Clear thesis statement and argument. Points made in logic sequence. Paragraphs support solid topic sentences. Sentence structure, syntax, grammar and punctuation all excellent. No misuse of words, and correct interpretation of foreign terms. (Optional Plus): Elegance of style and original turns of phrase</p>	<p>Thesis statement may be slightly unclear. Logic flow of arguments. Paragraphs not consistently supporting topic sentences. Very occasional mistakes in structure, syntax, grammar and punctuation. Some words, in English or foreign languages may be misused. Little originality of prose</p>	<p>Thesis is poorly stated. Argument tends to jump around though some points are identifiable. Many paragraphs without topic sentences. Some mistakes in structure, syntax, grammar, and punctuation. Misuse of words. No elegance of style</p>	<p>No discernible thesis. The writing is poor. The argument is fuzzy. Paragraphs lack topic sentences and fail to follow logically. Frequent mistakes in structure, syntax, grammar, and punctuation. Misuse of words. The essay is hard to follow</p>	<p>Shows no thesis, or effort to make one. The essay is full of mistakes and shows little or no knowledge of the mechanics of writing. The essay is hard to follow due to the poor writing</p>

## ASSIGNMENTS AND RESULTS:

The two sections that were evaluated had the following faculty instructors:

- Prof. Jeannie Whayne, who taught *The African American Freedom Struggle in Film*
- Prof. Rocio Gomez, who taught *Environmental History* (with particular attention to the developing world)

The selection of topics (including those of the three sections taught in the spring) reflects our effort to provide a variety of choices, fitting the variety of interest of students. Of course, students are not guaranteed to be able to select their favorite seminar topic (or teaching faculty), due to their potential conflicts of schedule. But generally students have been flexible enough, considering that the main purpose of our capstone classes is methodological, not topical.

Syllabi from both classes show a cumulative process of learning, through the production of short essays (two or three) during the semester; discussion sections and peer assessments of those preliminary steps; drafts of their final original research papers (in one of the two classes, as students were conducting their research, they were required to write research reports detailing their progress); and the research paper that constituted the artifact for this rubric assessment.

The large majority of students from both classes consistently scored 4 (good mastery) or 5 (excellent mastery) in all categories. This is also reflected in the overall grades for the final papers in both classes, which ranged from a low of 81 to a high of 97. These are high achievements for non-honors sections, and reflect an improvement from the immediate past editions. While not verifying if the average grades for the spring classes were the same, faculty who taught those classes verbally conveyed that there were only a handful of “C” grades among all three spring sections.

**ISSUE 1:** If there was an area that could be considered more “problematic” than the others, it’s in the SSLO 05 – Research Techniques, in which six students between the two classes scored 3 – while the other SSLO categories consistently scored 4 or 5. It should also be noted that about half of the students consistently scored either 5s or 4s in all categories. In another quarter of the students, the variations were minimal among the categories, between 4 and 5; and, as noted above, the students who scored 3 in SSLO 05 also scored no 5 in any of the categories. This should reflect a simple fact: when a student is well-trained, prepared, diligent, he/she rarely misses on a particular learning outcome. Students who show a less than average score in research techniques are more likely to show lower than average scores in other categories, including writing style.

In regard to these results, I am confirming this past observation: neither junior faculty/grad instructors should aim at popularity via easy high grades, nor senior faculty should bring on their expertise to weed out students who may be more meritorious than it appears from the scores they obtained on these papers. (see below, on this point, under “SUGGESTIONS”).

Unlike in the past years, the first category – SSLO 1, on contextualization did not present particular problems. Previous capstone seminars had scored lowest in SSLO 1, and we attributed this problem to the approximate knowledge students may have on the given subject of that Capstone section. As noted, students generally select their Capstone seminar based on their schedule; faculty teaches subjects for each section that are in their field of expertise. A student who has mostly focused on US History might then find himself/herself in a seminar on European History. This would place a student at a disadvantage, compared to the “Europeanists,” when it comes to proper contextualization and historiographical inquiry.

**Possible solution:**

While not a problem this year, this is an issue that will continue to compel us to provide a good distribution of topics between US, European, Asian, African, etc. history topics in our capstone seminars.

**ISSUE 2:** Overall, students seem to have had relatively few problems with writing style. Sure, there is still an unfortunate occurrence of the “historian in bloom” who considers good, elegant writing a secondary, or even ancillary requirement in the craft of History. We do not aim at forging “poet laureates,” but surely the cogency of argument sometimes suffered from poor/approximate syntax, and/or stiff/dry style. In some cases, students even displayed flawed diction, awkward sentence structure, and repetition. *Repetition* is, unfortunately, a frequent occurrence in History papers written by neophytes.

**Possible solution:**

One faculty (Prof. Gomez), noted that the purpose of her course is to give students an interdisciplinary education through the history major – in her case, an education that “incorporates science and technology to improve critical thinking, problem-solving, and diverse-fact-based-question-all-the-bastards writing skills” (sic).

So, if indeed we predicate our discipline on being so interdisciplinary, with re. to WRITING STYLE, why not explore more literature as well? While there are fine examples of craftsmanship in writing among historians, students may benefit from reading – in an interdisciplinary way – pieces of literature that have historical relevance. Even better, they could be invited to imitate the style of some of their favorite authors.

I have done something similar, adopting for my honors methods class a number of short essays on “how to write in the next millennium” by renowned writer/poet Italo Calvino. These essays were written as lectures to be delivered to English majors at Harvard, and constitute some of the basic methodological building blocs toward good writing – while leaving ample room for each individual style.

After examining those essays, I give students the “best paragraph you have ever written” assignment, inviting them to explore whichever style is outside the academic standards they have always followed - in a way, “unleashing” their desire for free expression: free, while highly structured. The paragraph or page can be written in any form/style, from poetry to serious scientific analysis to editorial, whether strongly opinionated, or humorous (perhaps in the style of “shouts and murmurs” of the New Yorker magazine). Whichever way (I even had an instance of a student composing lyrics for a song he then performed in class), the main purpose is to have

the student think of the highest possible standards of writing he wants to emulate, and “chisel” his/her few lines with quite a bit of brainwork, aimed at providing a compelling, “memorable” piece of writing.

**Other ISSUES** included the following (confirming past trends):

- the heavy reliance by some students on only a select number of sources
- poor bibliography
- formatting and referencing issues.

As Prof. Wayne noted, some students “did not know how to cite sources according to Chicago Manual of Style and did not fully understand the purpose of footnotes. Most of them reported that in their lower level (and even in some upper level) classes, they had been allowed to use MLA style or merely attach a “Works Cited” page.” In the end, in both classes, the students managed to write papers that employed Chicago Manual of Style and professed to understand the importance of citing their sources.

**Possible solution:**

Begin with an in-class exercise about the role of source citation in historical scholarship.

**OTHER MERITS and ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY INSTRUCTORS:**

**a) Late choice of research topics – cramming of research activity in last 2-3 weeks of class**

We find the “research report” approach adopted by Prof. Wayne the most conducive to attaining the learning goals of SSLO 2 through SSLO 5. In her class, the students’ first report identified their focus and indicated the primary resources available to carry out their project. In addition to merely identifying those sources, they were required to have examined and provided information on at two least them. In their second report, they were required to analyze at least six primary documents and two secondary sources, explaining how each bore on the argument they planned to make in their research paper. In their third and final research report, they presented annotated bibliographies and met with the instructor one-on-one to go over them.

As in other capstone seminars from past editions, Prof. Wayne noted that “devising an argument and arguing it through the paper seemed to be a new idea to most of them. All but two of them overcame that malady.” This may also be a problem related to the fact that many students are slow to define manageable topics and develop sets of questions about them to guide their research. Not infrequently, students come up with an actual research topic late in the semester. Compare this to the same in our upper level classes. My colleagues will concur with me that a majority of students communicate to the instructor their final paper topic around the last 2-3 weeks of class. While this may be a condoned practice in upper level courses, it cannot be accepted in capstone seminars, the focus of which is to build up the research assignment (see the three steps proposed by Prof. Wayne as methodology) throughout the semester.

**Possible solutions:**

- a) Require topics earlier, perhaps through “library day” sessions designed to explore potential topics and source materials with the instructor and with the assistance of our main reference librarians.
- b) the three reports adopted in Prof. Whyne’s class.

**b) Poor oral presentations?**

Some students are reported to show a low ability to distill an argument from assigned readings and conversing about it.

**Possible solution:**

Oral presentations should be mandated in every History course, at least in the upper level courses; presenting one’s work orally to co-workers, clients, etc. will be a professional requirement for most graduates irrespective of their eventual careers.

**HIGH MERIT and ACHIEVEMENTS:**

The capstone course is typically where the best student work is done, and our department is right in celebrating those accomplishments. About one third of the students overall ended with an “A” grade in the classes (an improvement from 2017-18, in which the percentage of “A” grades was slightly lower), and the papers of at least one of them from each section were recommended for publication in our *Ozark Historical Review*. Whether published or not, the capstone papers constitute writing samples that students can use in applications and that can help them achieve the kinds of successes in which our department can take pride.

Together with Professor Jim Gigantino, Chair of the History Department, I visited the two classes at the end of the fall semester, to have an informal talk with the students, complementing their exit surveys (see below). Students showed great enthusiasm for both the scope of the capstone seminars they attended, and the faculty who mentored them in those classes. We rest assured that the capstone seminar is not just a crowning achievement for History majors, but also a way for them to receive a quality of tutoring from our faculty that compares to that of a honors thesis advisor. Our impression was that students came out of the class with a clear understanding of the craftsmanship of History and of the career opportunities the major offers them.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

Let us start with a “mantra” oft-repeated by both faculty and the students filling out the exit survey (see below and appendix) at the end of the Capstone seminar:

**More research papers should be required in our 4000 level classes (thus providing the building blocs/necessary training for the capstone seminar)**

As a premise re this issue and all the issues noted above, I will start with an observation by my colleague, Prof. Todd Cleveland:

*“The issue here is that many (most?) students don’t declare History as their primary or secondary major until their sophomore or junior years. So, it’s hard to build the necessary/ideal “scaffolding.” All university majors are designed as if students enter the institution having already declared that major and then proceed to take a logical series of progressively more challenging classes building upon and expanding/honing skills introduced and mastered (to various degrees) in prior classes over the course of four years, but these learning trajectories are rarely that linear or purposefully graduated.”*

I believe this is a good reminder for all of us. And all the suggestions below may not apply properly, unless we make stronger efforts to recruit History majors earlier in their student careers. We may still be able to “condense” the possible instructors’ methods below in the space of two or three years for students inherited from other majors.

**Some of the suggestions below vary little from what we suggested in these past two years, because, simply put, if the problem persists, so does the suggested solution.**

- 1) A very simple – but feasible? – suggestion came from all instructors, and, based also on my experience, I strongly endorse it: the type of exercise required by the Senior Capstone seminar should come **earlier** in the students’ time here. As a student noted in the exit survey, “the capstone was the first time I had to write a research paper based on primary sources” (quite an astounding statement, which, though just representing an extreme case, may reflect a milder kind of unpreparedness for the whole group). Short of placing the Capstone Seminar – as we do for our Honors Methods class – as a mandatory (or strongly recommended) class in their junior year, we should at least offer classes with a methodology component earlier, possibly even in their sophomore year.
- 2) One possible solution – **STILL** strongly recommended by the Undergraduate Committee - is to **make Perspectives in History (HIST-1003) mandatory** for History majors. This would help students learn early on what a quality source is, whether it is primary or secondary, how to conduct research, how to shape a thesis, and argue it cogently. This will require **increasing the number of sections of HIST Perspectives** from our current one to two at least, perhaps one per semester of their freshmen year.
- 3) The above on Perspectives in History, however, will apply only to declared freshmen. What about students who come to us in their sophomore or even junior year? Could we perhaps poll each of our upper level classes, simply asking who joined the history major after freshman year, and provide these students with a slightly more challenging, methodological assignment for the class? My guess is that this would apply to a very small sample of students from each class, probably no more than two or three.
- 4) Upper level classes should encourage, promote, and tutor students in scholarly colloquy. Class participation must be improved. Our 3000-4000 level classes could have **discussion sessions** with our graduate assistants, or at least dedicate **a block of a few minutes of**

**each lecture to discussion participation**, or, even better, **short oral presentations** made mandatory for each student.

- 5) As also suggested by all instructors, we recommend that **more research papers should be required in our 4000 level classes**. The research pieces may not be as elaborate and extensive as in Capstone seminars, but narrowly-defined research topics, and a limit at 10 pages for a thinkpiece or research paper are recommended.
- 6) More than a suggestion, this is a question: **should the teaching of methodology come before the topical part of the Capstone courses?** The UDGS's opinion is that, yes, students should familiarize themselves with the nuts and bolts of methodology in the first weeks of class. This might also help them come up with feasible research topics and appropriate ways to formulate thesis questions earlier than in the post-fall/spring break period.
- 7) Related to no. 6 above. Indeed, several institutions have a methodology course mandated in the second or third year, independently from the capstone seminar. We have our Perspectives course for freshmen. Could a methodology course, even applied for just one credit hour (and five or six weeks of instruction, OR instruction through the semester but just one academic hour per week), be a good substitute for those who come to history as sophomores or juniors? The class itself could be structured along lines such as (these are just a few examples):
  - one class meeting devotes attention to the mechanics of footnoting
  - one class meeting addresses issues of causation and variables
  - one class focuses on how to frame a research question
  - one class teaches how to interpret secondary sources
  - etc.....
- 8) **WRITING**. We often claim that our majors are trained in research, analytical skills, critical thinking, and excellent proficiency in writing – assets that any employer, and not just the Education profession, will find valuable, and, in some cases, even essential. But how can we have the courage to write letters of recommendation for students who showed to be incapable of even using good prose?

We propose that History faculty dedicate themselves more to critiquing our students writing. Our junior faculty members – we should add – have done a commendable job in **helping students work on their drafts**. We do not suggest faculty to help students re-write drafts lazily written in haste at the last minute. **Enforcement of draft-writing, with examples on how to edit and revise, should be clearly applied in Capstone seminars;** it is strongly encouraged in upper level classes. We cannot demand of faculty to mentor each student in a class of 30+ students, but a clear set of rules on draft writing, with sample and examples, should be applied in each 3000 and 4000 level class in our department.

HOW to alleviate the potential burden of draft-reading for instructors? And HOW to incentivize students to write GOOD drafts?

- a) Focus on drafts could favor formative writing/learning processes over variety of assignments; in other words, instead of assigning a number of reviews, a 4000 level class could have each student focus on one theme that she/he carries on throughout the semester, through one or two drafts and final paper – while each student will also demonstrate the variety and scope of his/her knowledge through in class testing (mid-terms and finals);
  - b) each draft would receive a grade credited toward the final grade for the class, so as to motivate students to write fine drafts;
  - c) the drafts do not have to be necessarily of a complete paper; I, for one, have assigned “first five pages” drafts of 12 page papers, which was sufficient to provide feedback and guidance to students.
- 9) Fight grade inflation. I stated this last year, and I am repeating it here. This suggestion does not contradict the above statement on the improved record of our capstone seminars, with ca. one third of “A” grades. Grade inflation is something different. It’s the compromise to fit the standards required by our retention demands. The main problem, as I see it, is not within that upper 30% of the class deserving an A. It’s rather in the proliferation of “B” grades, when in fact many of those performances would deserve a “C.” Ivy League schools battle a grade inflation resulting in far too many “A” grades. Can you imagine a student receiving a “C” at Yale or Harvard, even if he/she deserves it? My own experience at Yale shows this was a “political” challenge, if not an impossibility. Bringing our upper level classes down from (over 100) an “85” to an “80” overall average may cost us a few majors, but surely we should not endorse some students who are inept or unwilling to learn with a B grade.
- 10) Improve our interdisciplinary reach and scope. Some progress has been made (as indicated below under “measures and changes undertaken..” And our record of cooperation with the Honors Program and their Honors Humanities Project (H2P) interdisciplinary course sequencing. But we can still make more progress for non-honors students, offering a variety of co-managed courses or course sequencing with departments such as Classical Studies, International Studies, English, Business, etc.

## **EXIT SURVEYS RESULTS**

Students are asked in senior capstone courses to reflect rigorously on what they have learned in their undergraduate education and offer their evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. While examining the learning outcomes only from the fall semester capstone classes, the exit surveys were administered for all five sections (fall and spring) of the capstone.

This year’s total of students enrolled in the capstone classes was 71, a marginal growth compared to last year’s 69. Most of them completed the exit surveys. As in all surveys since 2015, this one had only one question with a numerical rating: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared did you feel for the work you did in the capstone based on your previous HIST coursework and why?” This year the **average rating** was 8, with a large majority of students giving a score of 8; there were

also, notably, five scores of 10, and three scores of 5 (the lowest). This is the same average we had in the past years, with the exception of this past 2017-18, when the average score was 8.5.

Most students acknowledged the excellent work of mentorship offered by our faculty as well as our graduate instructors. I should highlight that the most frequently cited names (in answer to question n. 3: “What courses in HIST/types of skills learned in those courses helped you the most in the capstone”) were of our **junior faculty**. This is a good sign that, despite the need most junior faculty have to prioritize their research performance, they also provided excellent mentoring. If students evaluations and self-evaluations are so high, and if the department is recognized via their own feedback, and even a **2016 Ferritor Award for Teaching Excellence** in the whole department, then we can rest assured that we provided ample, valuable guidance to our students.

As in the past four years, the Capstone instructors, under recommendation of the UGS Committee, asked students to provide extensive responses, particularly on the questions that addressed their prior training in HIST courses (e.g.: “What could the HIST department do over the course of your academic career to help you prepare better for the capstone?”) or the questions about the connection between their HIST degree and their career plans.

These were common remarks in the responses (in the order of frequency):

- Need for a greater variety of courses (also to allow a more predictable course sequencing)
- More cooperation with area studies (several students embrace a particular area within history: hence some wanting more coop, for ex., with French, German, or the set up of Native American Studies, etc.)
- Need for a specific prequel to the capstone seminar. As one student put it: “a similar course, such as other universities’ ‘historical inquiry’ required earlier on in career.” (see “issues specifically addressed” below)
- Limited experience in working with and analyzing primary sources
- Need for flexibility on research area (social, political, diplomatic, etc.) within each capstone
- A limited understanding of career options outside the teaching profession

Surprisingly, this year there were **no complaints about the foreign language requirement**. This leads me to wonder if, outside our alignment with the B.A.T. program, we have done the right thing in forfeiting the foreign language requirement for HIST majors.

The last in the list of remarks above requires some reflection: the vast majority of students, ca. 80% indicated their intent to pursue a career in secondary education; a handful included grad school. The other potential career paths indicated are (in this order of frequency – where just one student provided that answer, is noted with a (1) ): “Not sure”; Law School; Non-Profit; Federal Agency; Museum curator, Military service (1), Fashion Industry (1).

So I am wondering why we persist in showcasing to perspective students (orientation) our statistics/data with a table showing that just about 20% of our HIST alumni went into Education careers (vs. a variety of other employments, including Law, business, NGOs, Federal agencies,

Medical, etc...). Either our data (provided by our Employer Relations Office) are mistaken; or the majority of our graduating students still have no clue about what job/career they will actually pursue. Either way, there is something profoundly wrong in our career orientation of students; or, at least, we - the professionals – live in a “bubble of contrived pragmatism” that compels us to advertise HIST in too far-fetched ways: sure, some business, federal, think tank employers and others may see an advantage in hiring a HIST graduate. But let’s not kid ourselves: History is still, like other Humanities, the degree of choice for aspiring teachers.

In any case, as shown below in “steps taken,” we have now improved our collaboration with the Employer Relations Office of Fulbright College, in an effort to better direct students toward a large variety of careers. If not via employer, it is via graduates and our correspondence with potential employers that we need to convey the usefulness of the skills set acquired by a History graduate.

### **Some issues specifically addressed in exit surveys**

Reporting students particularly expressed the need to have more training for long research papers in our upper level classes, with the possibility of tutoring through at least two paper drafts. Some went further, recommending a specific course, early in their student career, teaching the fundamentals of research skills and techniques (see our point on our Perspectives class, HIST 1003, above).

Like last year, as each capstone concentrated on the area of expertise of the respective instructors, some students felt that, due to scheduling, they had to choose the section that did not best fit their geographic, chronological, or especially topical preference. This may explain some of the most disappointing scores on contextualization and historiography, among the SSLOs.

Re. the foreign language requirement, again, like last year, some students have expressed appreciation for their study abroad experience, citing those sessions as one of their most important learning experiences. This is perhaps another invitation to recommend (strongly) foreign language (and foreign culture) training of our students, now that the requirement is no longer.

Last year, of the polled students, about one third reported that they would most likely pursue a teaching career, at the high school or college levels. This year, as noted above, the percentage exceeded two thirds of the students. Not only has the number of majors declined; it also seems that the number of professional options (or selections) has shrunk.

Correspondence with faculty. There is hardly any substitute for tutoring and face to face (office hours) contact. As one student commented with re. to her lack of information re. new courses on the curriculum that she would have liked to learn about before it was too late (seeing them on fliers once the semester was well beyond the orientation phase): “Emails are great, but let’s be honest, I don’t EVEN read through most.” (see my point on emails below, though).

## **SOME OF THE MEASURES/CHANGES ALREADY UNDERTAKEN BY THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT**

### **Premise: The Decline in HIST majors nationwide**

Over the last six years (2012-2018), HIST has experienced a decline in Majors and Student Semester Credit Hours (SSCH) while the University itself has grown. The decline is much more pronounced in the number of majors (ca. 28%) than in the number of SSCH (ca. 3%). Especially when compared to other departments in the humanities, which have experienced a much greater loss in SSCH, History seems to offer a great service to the General Education curriculum with its introductory classes. Other Fulbright college departments, however, have experienced a notable growth, higher than the growth of overall student population at the UofA over the past six years: most notably, Psychology, Communications, and Biological Sciences.

The decline in HIST has been a notable feature across the nation in the past ten years. With the exception of two notable Ivy League programs in History, academic institutions, especially the public ones, have experienced declines comparable or greater than ours. Data and sources discussed by the UGS Committee this past year included the following articles:

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2016/the-decline-in-history-majors>

[https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-decline-of-historical-thinking?utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_social-type=owned&mbid=social\\_facebook&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR19R4OWqgP9otFD6COLTDcsJYn8JpTK6zm3NfAJOmm1dykNOe8L-ymvSKM](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-decline-of-historical-thinking?utm_brand=tny&utm_social-type=owned&mbid=social_facebook&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR19R4OWqgP9otFD6COLTDcsJYn8JpTK6zm3NfAJOmm1dykNOe8L-ymvSKM)

Although our department has not fared any worse than the vast majority of HIST departments in institutions nationwide, and although we have had some incremental improvements/growth in the numbers of minors and honors students, we should not take the decline for granted as a reflection of the current job market or economic contingency, and we have been working on the following solutions to stem the loss of majors, recruit students, and inform/prepare them for the careers that a HIST major can offer (**1 through 7 are reported also in last year's assessment**):

1. **Skills and Retention:** Introduction from Fall of 2016 of a topical History Perspective course, taught by faculty, granting 3 credit hours and meeting both a major elective requirement and the perspectives requirement. This course introduces students to the basic research and analytical skills of the historian's craft
2. **Recruitment and Retention:** Improving the mentoring of our graduate instructors with the introduction, started in the Fall of 2016, of four large sections (one each) of our core curriculum survey classes taught by faculty with prior teaching awards and staffed with two or three graduate assistants per sections

3. **Retention:** The current curriculum agreement between the HIST Department and the Fulbright Advising office provides more flexibility than in the past for course substitutions at the discretion of the UGSD that will enable students to receive appropriate credit transfers from accredited institutions or study abroad programs

4. **Retention and Skills:** We have encouraged more faculty members to teach the capstone, turning the previous ratio of 2-1 ratio of instructors/faculty for the two semesters into a 1-2 ratio instructors/faculty.

5. **Retention:** In coordination with the Fulbright Advising Office we have assisted students with course sequencings that allow the gradual acquisition of research skills, geographic or chronological area expertise.

6. **Careers:** Starting from the Fall of 2016, and in cooperation with the Employer Relations Office of Fulbright College, we have provided career mentoring, conveying the applicability of the training, concepts, and skills gained from a History major to careers outside of teaching and archival or museum work

7. **Careers:** The Department has also encouraged high impact practices through internships, and improved the existing network of History alumni connected to the Department through Linked-In, which helps us track students' success records after graduation

8. **Careers:** The Employer Relations Office has also gathered a group of "career champions" among directors of undergraduate programs. The History department was the first to sign that agreement of cooperation in the fall of 2018. Among the several tasks assigned to champions, the project also entails the development of class projects that relate to specific career competencies that could also be included as a faculty resource to others. To cite just a few examples of forthcoming proposals from the UGS Director: this can be in the form of informational interviews that incorporates aspects of oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration and professionalism; or in class projects that allow students to hunt for internships in the work fields they would like to explore; advise students on how to "build their own brand," creating social media accounts that they want potential employers to see; advise students on how to write resumes, and how to conduct job interviews.

9. **Recruitment:** A return of our Department's involvement with the District History Day event (each March) and planning organization (currently managed by NWACC). The main purpose is for our department (and flagship institution) to become a primary sponsor of the event and provide faculty judges to it as well as solicit faculty for involvement in some teacher-in-service workshops. Recruitment can be achieved through contact with students as well as teachers. Providing contact and hospitality to teachers in particular may prove useful to recruiting. The teachers will eventually become our main

communication venue to promising students who however may not have much knowledge of the potentials of history major.

10. **Recruitment:** for the same purpose of connecting with social studies teachers in AR, the UGS Director joined the Arkansas Council for the Social Studies, to help our department stay informed of their initiatives, and, where possible, participate in their meetings, especially the annual general meeting of the Council in the summer.

11. **Recruitment through scholarships:** our recruitment efforts have expanded also thanks to the addition of scholarships opportunities. In conjunction with the above plan to connect with History Day, we also will offer (from next year) a scholarship to the student who wins the district competition; the Glenn Newkirk award (begun this year) is also an addition to our already remarkable list of awards to students based on merit.

12. **Recruitment, Retention, Careers:** We finalized our collaboration project, aligning our program with the School of Education and Health Professions, to combine their new Bachelor of Arts in Teaching (BAT) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. This allows students to pursue the two degrees in two years, and obtain certification for teaching in Social Studies Education. . As the state of Arkansas now considers Secondary Social Studies a critical shortage area, this degree from the state's flagship institution will allow History majors with a BAT degree to pursue a secure job path.

13. **Retention and Skills:** within the same cooperation agreement, the History Department revised its major requirements, turning the mandatory foreign language requirement into an option, still strongly recommended for certain area studies in History or for those who intend to pursue graduate school after their BA; honors students also still must have an intermediate level II proficiency in foreign language in order to graduate. To maintain a learning outcome of cultural competency and diversity, students now can choose liberally four classes, or 12 credit hours to be selected between foreign language classes and/or a number of introductory classes (1000 and 2000 level) providing a multicultural and multidisciplinary dimension to their curriculum.

14. **Recruitment and Skills:** this past year we proposed a number of new 1000-level courses designed to attract students who normally would not take HIST courses. The courses will be designed by HIST faculty to appeal to a broad non-honors undergraduate audience, especially those in other colleges. We have already received approval for two courses - History of Football (taught by Prof. Cleveland) and History of Beer (taught by Prof. Brubaker) – which will start in Spring 2020 (History of Beer) and Fall 2020 (History of Football). To these two new courses, faculty has been invited to propose other topical introductory courses of wide appeal that would include (interdisciplinary) issues of Gender, Technology, Environment, and to be inaugurated in 2022 – after the two year cycle/experimentation with HIST of Football and HIST of Beer. To incentivize

instructors to develop these new courses and curricula, the department is offering \$4,000 in research incentive funds for each proposed course.

Furthermore, the courses will be in the 120-150 seat range and will include GA support. Online sections of 40 students would also be offered each semester, including summer, depending on demand and resources.

The main purpose should be clear: it is our intention to engage more students and convert them into history minors or majors as these courses would count towards both; improve the education of our potential majors/minors through courses that, while topically focused, still provide the set of skills that will work well as introduction to the craftsmanship of History; increase our SSCH distribution; through the online sections, attract more non-traditional students, and obtain more funding opportunities for HIST from Global Campus, which in turn will benefit faculty's research funding.

15. **Recruitment:** A new course starting this coming Fall, HIST 2093 Animals in History, about the interactions between humans and animals (domestication, religion, warfare, symbolism, society, etc..) and counting toward the General Education curriculum has the same purpose as the above described 1000 level courses. In addition, it offers excellent opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration with other departments and schools, most notably Animal Science within the College of Agriculture, Food and Life Sciences.

16. **Retention:** as a result of the introduction of these new courses, HIST minors will be able to select the two intro courses among not just the US and World HIST sequence, but also among the new courses, which in any case fulfill the same learning outcomes for Gen Ed as US or World HIST. History majors will be able to select among these new 1000 and 2000 level courses in their list of 12 credit hours fulfilling their multicultural/diversity curriculum (in alternative to or conjunction with the foreign language sequence to Intermediate II). With new courses that may be more attractive than the established US and World History surveys, students who minor or major in History may be more drawn to stay within the major and perhaps even graduate earlier.

17. **Retention:** the UGS Director created a group of HIST major students in an advising capacity, to provide feedback to faculty and advocate students' needs. The group, named History Advisory Board, is composed of nine students. They met with members of the UGS Committee in the fall of 2018, and consulted with the UGS Director in the spring of 2019. Their most pressing observations addressed the following issues: information regarding honors thesis timelines and requirements; ways to access opportunities to become involved (volunteering, internships, etc.) at surrounding historical sites, historical societies, museums, etc.; course offerings in a semester versus the course catalogue/student needs; scheduling of elective history courses.

Confirming some of the feedback received via capstone exit surveys, students of the History Advisory Board mentioned their preference, or rather, need for a curriculum that extends both the geographic scope and thematic breadth of upper level courses, the faculty was reminded that highly specialized courses and seminars with narrowly defined topics and themes might fail to recruit an adequate number of students. Note taken.

18. **Retention:** we made changes in the catalog description of HIST class offerings, so as to not mislead students into thinking that some classes would be offered on a regular basis. Where appropriate, we maintained or proposed new regular offerings (e.g., every Odd Spring; every Even Fall, etc.); where we needed corrections, we changed some regular offerings into irregular. Furthermore, in an effort to assist faculty in keeping some of their classes on a regular basis, we are offering our ABD instructors to substitute the full time faculty when the professor needs to be on leave for any reason – fellowships, sabbatical, course reduction for junior faculty, etc.

19. **Recruitment:** Brochures describing our department and the career paths it offers were distributed at this last freshmen orientation; we thus joined only one more department (World Languages) that has adopted this informational approach.

20. **Retention:** Correspondence with students. As UGS Director, I have made it customary to communicate to students each and every event sponsored by or connected with our department. My email blasts to our listservers for HIST majors and minors have become famous (or notorious). It was, after all, by request of the students themselves, when we had our Program Review in 2017: the need to stay informed. I have noticed a slight increase of student participation in these events (including career-related events). Perhaps the comments by some students (as reported above) about “not reading emails” are a bit misleading. We have, in any case, to take into account the reluctance of students to read extensive emails. – and fliers should be posted well in advance of events or class offerings.

## Conclusion

(Repeat from last year): Our students continue to have adequate training throughout their History coursework, especially at their upper level, but further steps need to be taken to improve the students’ skills set in all aspects involving research, analysis, written and oral expression. The department is also taking steps to further improve course offerings and the research components in them.

Career mentoring has been one of the most notable improvements, thanks to our cooperation with the Employer Relations Office, and – we expect in the future – thanks to our renewed involvement with initiatives such as History Day.

Our efforts to redesign our major/minor programs (via course reduction/elimination of the foreign language requirement, the introduction of new “large appeal” introductory courses, and alignment with other programs) will pay some dividends in terms of recruitment for sure, and perhaps retention as well.

Our cooperation with the Office of Student Success remains strong, as we have often piloted some of their initiatives associated with curriculum design, assessment, online teaching, financial aid opportunities.

While this assessment is confined to the evaluation of our capstone seminar students, we should note that the recruitment and quality of HIST majors in the Honors program has been relatively successful, compared to the general decline of the major.

Our mentoring is made strong not only by our faculty, but by our graduate instructors and assistants as well. Students often have no clue of who is who, and they give enviable evaluations of our doctoral candidates. Their teaching record is stellar. Overall the mentorship record of our department brings the recent testimony of the Campus wide Daniel E. Ferritor Award for Departmental Excellence in Teaching.

And, of course, our research record remains one of the most accomplished ones in Fulbright College and campus-wide.

## APPENDIX

University of Arkansas History Department

Graduation Survey (Undergraduates)

[to be administered in required capstone course, HIST 4893]

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Expected graduation date \_\_\_\_\_

Questions on your experience as a major in History:

1. What surprised you the most about what skills you needed in order to complete the capstone?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared did you feel for the work you did in the capstone based on your previous HIST coursework AND why?
3. What courses in HIST/types of skills learned in those courses helped you the most in the capstone?
4. What could the HIST department do to help you over the course of your academic career to help prepare you for the capstone better?

5. What suggestions would you make for the future of the History degree program?

6. Other comments on strengths and weaknesses of the History degree program.

7. Do you feel like the history major has prepared you for your intended career? Why or why not?

8. What are your short-term plans (next 2 years)?

9. What are your longer-term plans?

10. Contact address/e-mail after graduation