

**UMBC History Department Academic Program Review
External Reviewers' Report, March 11-13, 2018
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The report below contains three sections. **Findings** provides a brief overview or summary of our observations; each of these is considered in greater depth in the accompanying **Discussion** section. **Recommendations** articulates three key steps that we prioritize for action. Responses to the questions posed in anticipation of the review are signaled in **bold**.

Findings

- 1) The History Department is exceptionally well-run; the faculty have given thoughtful and thorough attention to its curriculum and assessment processes. Its systems are excellent.
- 2) The department climate is extremely positive. Its terrific staff and well-organized structure contribute to a stable atmosphere. Faculty and staff are hardworking, congenial, and effective.
- 3) As researchers, the faculty are productive and influential scholars; their success is not only a testimony to their scholarly excellence but generates important visibility for UMBC.
- 4) As educators, the faculty and adjuncts have cultivated an environment in which teamwork and collaboration undergird both curriculum planning and coursework. Both undergraduate and graduate students report high levels of satisfaction: course evaluations are strong, and in conversation students describe both a clear understanding of the intellectual and professional development they have experienced as History students, and their strong sense of support from faculty, who are caring, perceptive, and dedicated advisors and advocates.
- 5) Recruitment to the graduate program has held steady in recent years--an achievement given the increasingly competitive nature of graduate admissions across the U.S.--but the department has seen a decline in the numbers of undergraduate majors. The department has taken important steps to address issues that might better attract students to History courses and envisions additional steps that may help prospective students find their way to these courses, the major, and minors. To reach their full potential, they will need active support from units across campus.
- 6) The department is concerned about the redesign of the HCST program. Given the growth and significance of the history of science and technology nationally, the inclusion of history in the future program seems a natural fit.
- 7) The department recognizes the value and impact of its nationally known program in Public History, and wonders both how to "refresh" it going forward and to address the challenges associated with regional competition. We find that the program is doing an outstanding job of serving both graduate and undergraduate audiences, and can build on its existing strengths in community engagement and in the history of inequality and social justice, which has been flagged as a "core theme" across the department. But the success of the program has created some sustainability issues, as the director's role as a mentor, advisor, and community partner is hard to replace when her attention must necessarily turn toward research or other activities beyond the classroom, suggesting the need for additional faculty support in this area.
- 8) The strengths of the department are numerous and are outlined below. We don't really find weaknesses but did spot some opportunities for growth in terms of alumni networking and external communications.

Key Recommendations

- 1) To address enrollments, we recommend a series of steps to improve marketing of the courses, from revising course titles to producing print and online materials that illuminate pathways through coursework, including double majors, minors, and certificates.
- 2) To ensure the viability and credibility of the redesigned HCST program, we recommend that the campus consider a hire in the history of science; additionally, it might be wise to contemplate ways that this historian of science have meaningful expertise in public history methods and practice, which might alleviate some pressure on that program as well.
- 3) We urge continued support of the Public History program at both the main campus and Shady Grove. In addition to the increased faculty support recommended above, we recommend that the program build on its existing strength in the history of inequality and social justice, and skill in grassroots community engagement, to develop a distinct identity that separates it from other programs in the region.

Discussion

- 1) In terms of the **appropriateness of general goals and specific objectives**, we find the History Department to be exceptionally well-run; the faculty have given thoughtful and thorough attention to its curriculum and assessment processes. Its systems are excellent, and the department (especially the chair) has effectively and creatively used **program resources**.

We concur with the department's self-study, which asserts that the undergraduate curriculum succeeds in "helping students become strong analytical researchers, clear writers, and historical thinkers." The document articulating "Recommended Skills and Guidelines for Undergraduate History Classes at UMBC" is a model for departments nationwide. The **quality of the curriculum** is high, and the teaching materials and pedagogical methods do indeed reflect state of the art within particular areas. In the period between the last APR and this one, the department took a number of steps to "**close the loop**" on **student learning outcomes**; they have made good use of a range of assessment instruments--existing and new--to improve teaching and learning, and the results are visible in student achievement and satisfaction. The work the faculty has undertaken to craft common rubrics and assessment tools, toward a "coherent process for assessment of student performance," is outstanding.

- 2) The department climate is excellent. Its well-organized structures contribute to a stable atmosphere. Faculty and staff are hardworking, congenial, and effective. The department has indeed cultivated, as the self-study reports, a "cooperative, non-hierarchical culture in which faculty and staff emphasize and nurture mutual respect and shared responsibility." We also applaud the dedicated and caring staff who support the work of both faculty and students; these employees are the backbone of the department's overall effectiveness.

- 3) As researchers, the faculty are productive and influential scholars; their success is not only testimony to their scholarly excellence but generates important visibility for UMBC. This is an incredibly hardworking and talented faculty, as evidenced not only by the large number of publications and their recognition with significant awards, but also the many ways in which the faculty serve both the campus and the profession.

The **level of scholarly work by faculty** members in the program is not merely “suitable” for this program, but impressive by any standard or measure. The faculty productivity alone is striking given the heavy service load many faculty members carry alongside deep commitments to pedagogy and advising. Department leadership has devoted considerable energy to promoting faculty for both on-campus awards and recognition, and national awards as well, and with deserved success. This is an asset not only for the reputation and ranking of the department, but for the student body as well, as both graduate and undergraduate students benefit from a department culture firmly grounded in research--the M.A. students (as we heard them report) from the care taken to guide their thesis research, and the undergraduates in courses and funding sources designed to encourage and support their own scholarly inquiry.

4) As educators, department faculty have cultivated an environment in which teamwork and collaboration--among faculty and among students--undergird both curriculum planning and coursework. In terms of the **students’ perception of the quality** of the program and their evaluations of the faculty’s teaching and mentoring, we find that undergraduate and graduate students report high levels of satisfaction: course evaluations are strong, and in conversation students describe both a clear understanding of the intellectual and professional development they have experienced as History students, and their strong sense of support from faculty, who are caring, perceptive, and dedicated advisors and advocates.

In terms of curriculum, steps taken since the last APR seem to have proven effective. The redesign of Hist 201, and the decision to reduce its size, have proven to be sound steps toward grounding new students in the major. The syllabi we reviewed--for the new initiatives in History 201 and 701, as well as in Public History--demonstrate the faculty’s engagement with the best new work in both scholarly expertise and pedagogy. Students are reading important new work alongside classics in the field, while hands-on assignments beyond traditional academic writing (Wikipedia entries, videos, etc.) offer students new ways to demonstrate mastery of the material while building skills valued in the workplace.

To help move the curriculum beyond frameworks entirely grounded in time and place, the department has identified four “Core Themes” that showcase thematic and transnational links among their courses. Two of them reflect traditional strengths in (1) Political and Policy and (2) Public History, while two represent more recent interests in (3) the History of Globalization and (4) the History of Inequality and Social Justice. We concur that these steps should prove effective in helping undergraduates select courses and move efficiently toward their degrees, as well as attract more students to studying history.

At the graduate level, similar steps to streamline the curriculum have proved successful. The new HIST 702 is particularly well-conceived, as it helps students more quickly identify topics and sources, and introduces them to subjects like research ethics and note-taking skills, writing and peer review workshops, and departmental seminars at which they present their draft thesis prospectus. The sharing of research proposals in a public forum allows them to receive important early feedback on their projects from other faculty members in attendance. The graduate students

we spoke with articulated a deep appreciation for this course and its role in the crafting of their theses.

The **program facilities** seem adequate, although we are aware of a gap between the technology needs of the department (both in terms of computer replacement programs and classroom technology) and the funds provided for this purpose. The university needs to address the lack of tech support in classrooms often assigned to history courses.

5) While recruitment to the graduate program has held steady in recent years--an achievement given the increasingly competitive nature of graduate admissions across the U.S.--the History department has seen a decline in the numbers of undergraduate majors. Although this is a national phenomenon and one that we experience at our own universities, it is definitely worth rethinking what history courses have to offer current undergraduates and becoming more creative in conveying that to them. The History department addresses these questions in the self-study and recognize that today's students are attracted to such areas as civic engagement and transnational history. We are particularly impressed by the department's introduction of the four core themes (mentioned above) that the department plans to utilize in reorganizing its courses. These topical themes, especially as outlined in materials addressed to undergraduates and prospective students, will underscore the "relevance" of history courses to the concerns of present-day students.

The department has asked us to consider its **proposals to counteract falling numbers** and asks **what additional suggestions** we might have as they address this challenge. We note that the department has taken important steps to address issues to attract students to both History courses and the History major, and envisions additional steps that may help prospective students find their way to these courses, the major, and minors. These include putting into place several changes to the major, for example, rethinking which introductory courses should be required. Additional plans include easing the path for community college transfer students, promoting the minor in Public History at the main campus, and redesigning the curriculum to emphasize global/transnational and civic engagement. We are encouraged by these efforts as they may attract students to try out a history course (and then complete the major or minors).

We particularly applaud the work being done at the Shady Grove campus to attract new History majors. Their approach, which includes email, online video, in-person information sessions, direct classroom visits, outreach to faculty and academic counselors, and special presentations highlighting the History major and Public History minor, has been particularly successful. Supported by resources provided by the Division of Professional Studies, the Shady Grove history faculty have nearly doubled their majors in one year. The amount of dedication and heavy-lifting here is admirable, and the payoff is clearly visible. The question of sustainability arises, however, as this labor is highly dependent on individual personalities and relationships. While Shady Grove has a more clearly defined target audience, the department as a whole is considering using some of their techniques in reaching prospective high school and transfer students. Shady Grove has the advantage of help and resources from the DPS, which is not available to the main campus. Designing marketing materials and videos are not necessarily skills history faculty possess, nor can they devote the time necessary to develop a marketing campaign. It might be helpful to

provide some course releases or devote some GAs to these projects, at least to get them off the ground so that they can be self-sustaining.

In terms of curricular redesign, the department has already revised History 201, the gateway course for sophomores, and History 496/497, the capstone course for seniors. The undergraduate students we met with spoke highly of how History 201 had instilled in them research and writing skills that had helped them in their other history courses. Now the department is considering how to reorganize its first-year requirements (currently three courses from either half of the U.S. survey courses, either half of the Western civilization survey courses, and East-Asian or world history). The department is discussing giving students the choice of taking three courses from the 100 and 200 levels. We would also encourage them to consider retitling the survey courses in U.S., Western, and world history. We are not suggesting that the content of these courses needs to change, but that titles could be more descriptive and exciting.

We also encourage the department to rethink all of its course titles. The undergraduate catalog and course schedules for each semester are to some extent marketing tools. As students peruse courses and consider what to take, the titles of courses can catch their eyes, as it were, and lead them to read the fuller description and even sign up for the course. Our meeting with undergraduate students underscored the importance of course titles. One student stated that she was attracted to the word “nostalgia” in a course title and signed up. (She also reported that it was an excellent course.) Other students noted that, were they not majors, they might not have an inkling how interesting a course on, say, a country in a time period, might be. They also remarked that, from their own experiences, these kinds of courses attracted mostly history majors, whereas typically titles courses included a mix of students. Although we, as history faculty, might see the intrinsic merit of taking, say, “The Roman Empire” or “The Second World War,” the students we talked with did not (or at least did not until they learned more about history). A number of courses in the history offerings already have more exciting titles; we encourage faculty to consider new titles for their time-and-place courses. We also suggest that the department tap the motivated and engaged community of majors and prospective majors in this process, to draw on the perspective and creativity of these students as they rethink how courses are titled, as this is the audience for the changes proposed.

In addressing enrollment, like other issues, the faculty evidences a palpable “can-do” spirit, which is admirable in many ways, but there is only so far this “roll up your sleeves” ethic should go: to accomplish the many aims that lay beyond typical faculty job descriptions and workload (e.g., expanding marketing, recruitment, communications, etc.) the faculty need more support in these areas. For instance, we were pleased to learn from Dean Casper that both admissions and advancement are invested in promoting Humanities and Social Sciences. Marketing and communication efforts will need robust support from Creative Services to produce compelling print material. We offer a set of recommendations, suggestions and ideas below, all with the intent that these efforts should be not be undertaken by the faculty alone, but rather supported by the appropriate units around campus who have the appropriate skills and expertise to bring these projects to successful fruition.

- One recommendation is for the History department to emphasize how well it fits as a double major with other departments or programs. Global Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies,

Political Science, and Media and Communication Studies are obvious matches, but there could certainly be others. The department might consider designing sample combined course paths so that students could plan double majors earlier; these might be published in visually compelling brochures or rack cards that students can pick up in the department lobby and take home to discuss with their parents and other mentors.

- We learned from our conversations with both faculty and students the important role the department's dynamic teachers play in recruiting students to history courses, and to the major. The department might take further advantage of its demonstrated ability to work as a team and harness those talents more systematically, by creating systems in which faculty more purposefully invite colleagues into their courses to speak on areas within their expertise, letting students know about upcoming courses that these faculty members will be teaching. Students in general, and at UMBC, respond to this individual attention--as we know from the success of the Shady Grove faculty, who have adopted a related technique in their work. Students who encounter Professors B and C in the course with Professor A might be more likely to pursue that additional coursework in the future.
- The History Department is contemplating tapping its considerable strengths in the field of women's history in the development of a minor in this area, a step that they hope might address the gender imbalance among students in the Department and might attract students majoring in Psychology, Media and Communication Studies, Geography, Gender and Women's Studies (GWST), and some of the sciences, such as Biology. Offering the minor, the department reports, would allow the faculty to offer women's history courses (cross-listed with GWST) more regularly, addressing a long-standing goal of both departments. Should the department pursue this step, we recommend it be framed as women's and gender history. We also propose that the department do some focus group work with students currently enrolled in these popular courses to gauge interest in a minor.
- In addition to the above, the faculty might also actively seek out other opportunities to connect to departments where enrollments are currently higher. For instance, the emerging field in History Communication, being discussed among the national community of public historians, might prove a useful point of intersection between History students looking for ways to take insights from the discipline into new professional settings, and Communication students looking to apply their knowledge and skills to this content.

6) We are encouraged that the Dean of CAHSS has appointed a task force to evaluate and design a new Human Context of Science and Technology (HCST) program. Because the "human context of science and technology" cannot be understood apart from its historical underpinnings, it is essential that the History department plays a significant role in this re-envisioning, and we recommend that a new tenure-track hire in history of science/technology (possibly combined with public history) be approved. History of science, as a field, has grown and developed over the years, and the contexts of gender, social and cultural values, political stakes, institutional structures, and the like, are now essential components of high-quality research. It is difficult to imagine a top-notch program in science and technology (like HCST) without at least one historian of science. That being said, collaboration between historians, philosophers, literary scholars, political scientists, and members of STEM fields could lead to a vibrant program that would attract undergraduate and graduate students. Junctures could exist, for example, between courses on science and social issues, and biogenetics. The decline the existing HCST program has

experienced provides the college and its departments (including history) to design a new collaborative structure that reflects twenty-first-century methodologies and addresses the concerns and needs of the student body.

The administration should consider approving a position in HCST that intersects with the needs of its thriving public history program. Science museums are thriving in terms of visitation, funding, and hiring, yet many of those jobs go to museum studies graduates with little training in either science or history. A carefully crafted position description could well yield a new colleague who could harness this energy on behalf of the already thriving and nationally known public history program while also providing an essential center of gravity for the HCST program.

7) The department recognizes the value and impact of its nationally known program in Public History, and wonders both how to “refresh” it going forward, as well as how to address the challenges of regional competition. We find that the program is doing an outstanding job of serving both graduate and undergraduate audiences. Enrollment in the highly regarded Public History program accounts for around half of the graduate student community.

Yet, the program must contend with the number of competing programs its proximity, which can create competition for students, internship supervisors, and community partners. While UMBC offers the only so-named Public History graduate track in Maryland, and one of only two undergraduate public history minors/concentrations, there are 14 graduate and 12 undergraduate public history programs/concentrations in the mid-Atlantic region. Regional competitors include Temple University (well-known for its high-quality training in museum studies) and American University (which enjoys a similar profile) as well as George Mason, which benefits from the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

The presence of those competing programs is a challenge in terms of attracting the most promising students; however, UMBC has important strengths that distinguish it from its competitors, especially its reputation for excellence in the areas of community engagement and the history of inequality and social justice, which has been flagged as a “core theme” across the department. UMBC has staked out important ground as a leader in grassroots public history and community engagement. Given that issues related to the History of Inequality and Social Justice have long been a priority for the Public History program, this is an important and distinctive area in which UMBC is already a recognized leader *and* presents an opportunity in terms of cultivating a distinct identity that should help attract applicants.

There may also be opportunities to foster regional or inter-campus cooperation that mitigate the effects of competition in ways that might also be effective for attracting students to the UMBC program. One place to explore such collaboration may be in pooling resources to host one-day workshops and seminars on concrete public history skills and approaches—e.g. fundraising, project management, collections care, conflict management, and so forth. These events could be open to UMBC’s partners in the public history community (museum professionals, preservationists, staff of community organizations, etc), allowing students and prospective students to learn alongside (and connect with) working professionals while gaining new hands-on skills in public history practice.

Given the President's ambitious goal, as described to us by Vice Provost Moreira, to grow the overall UMBC graduate program, the Public History program is certainly going to be in increasing demand, and so will need additional resources. The success of the program has created some sustainability issues as the director's role as a mentor, advisor and community partner is hard to replace when her attention must necessarily turn toward research or other activities beyond the classroom. The possibility of creating additional faculty support here in the context of the HCST program is discussed above. Moreover, both undergraduates and graduate students reported to us their sense that the Career Center is largely dedicated to undergraduates, especially students in STEM fields. A recommendation to the campus leadership as this expansion at the graduate level unfolds is to invest in resources specifically designed to support professional development across the Humanities.

8. Lastly, we are asked to consider the department's particular **strengths**, and how we envision they might further capitalize on them, as well as any particular **weaknesses**, and our suggestions in terms of ways to address them.

The strengths of the department are numerous. The quality of the scholarship produced by the faculty is high, and admirable by any measure. The degree to which the department functions as a team is enviable; we have encountered few departments that have cultivated as successfully such a collegial and supportive environment, which not only produces a healthy work environment, but also facilitates the success of strong curricular and assessment systems. That success is also reflected in the responses we heard from students; the degree to which they feel seen and supported, their individual talents and aspirations understood and advanced by faculty mentors and caring support staff, is extraordinary.

We don't really find weaknesses, but did spot some opportunities:

- The department has begun to tap its alumni network as a resource, which we heartily encourage. Drawing on that community more purposefully, perhaps in the form of an alumni advisory board, might address stated needs in professional development for students, and also possibly some external advising. Particularly among the graduates of its nationally prominent Public History program, it might prove valuable to tap them in more formal ways as mentors to current students; this step might also relieve some small part of the tremendous workload of the program director, as some mentoring and advising could be provided by the community of alumni.
- We are delighted to hear about work afoot to continue supporting a department newsletter, and that resources are being allocated to the not insignificant labor such publications demand. Such tools help alumni stay connected, advertise the department's achievements to prospective students and colleges, and raise the department's flag for potential donors. As is the case throughout this report, we urge the campus leadership to support such efforts in meaningful ways, facilitating (for instance) access to Creative Services and other experts in graphic design and production, as well as campus offices devoted to development and advancement, as this work is better undertaken by professionals in these specialties.