A PROPOSAL FOR REVISING THE HISTORY SENIOR SEMINAR COURSE

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This essay proposes that history departments rethink and restructure the typical history senior seminar course to reflect better the range of activities and careers that history majors pursue after graduation. That is, this paper proposes the design of a capstone course consisting of a series of activities that reflects better the preparation a baccalaureate degree in history provides and, in addition, allows for formative as well as summative evaluation. This design also would allow students to select their own theme around which to organize their assignments.

The typical "senior seminar" that about half of history departments at American colleges and universities require of undergraduate majors centers on the semester-long research project and a lengthy paper perhaps running 25 or more pages. It tends to replicate activities that college and university history faculty members do professionally—that is, well-researched, focused studies of article or book length designed for scholarly publication. Such an assignment implicitly assumes that most history majors will move to graduate school and seek doctoral degrees in history. Surely, as we all know, this is not the case.

In addition to this larger issue—that the typical course fails to reflect the range of professions into which history bachelor degree holders enter after graduation—there are other concerns. Young people tend to read less than previous generations and they come into class and their senior seminar course likely having done less reading, being familiar with fewer archetypes, and having less experience in writing. If given too much freedom, they might muddle through the research and collection of notes; they might work through writing the paper; and, in the end, they will receive an appropriate grade. But this summative review system does not help them develop skills they need. It lacks continual and regular feedback.

Quite frankly, history departments, compared to other academic departments in the humanities and social sciences, do not often make clear the meaning of their discipline, the meaning of historical study, or the meaning of a history major. Many departments in the humanities and social sciences make clear statements about the meaning of their respective academic disciplines. This statement often takes the form of a first-year course titled "Introduction to" or "Principles of" the academic discipline, and frequently there also is a senior-level capstone course or some other requirement that clarifies what faculty members believe the earning of a baccalaureate degree means in that discipline.

Think about history departments. We have many entry-level courses that might include such offerings as an American history chronological sequence, an American civilization thematic course, western civilization surveys, European history surveys, world civilization surveys, East Asian civilization surveys, Asian civilization surveys, and likely many more. With this wealth of introductory courses, different history departments require different arrangements of their courses for the baccalaureate degree—some want only western civilization, some want American history survey plus another survey, and

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so on. A simple perusal of on-line catalogs and bulletins from colleges and universities in any given area of the country makes this point. We miss the opportunity to state explicitly what "history" is. Students in survey classes fairly quickly become concerned with learning the requirements of a given introductory course or course sequence, which entails learning facts of the subject under discussion and themes that can tie those facts together into something meaningful. We miss the opportunity to make explicit comments on the larger issue of "What is history?"

The senior capstone course is also problematic. I have searched through history requirements at colleges and universities across the country. About half of the history departments have no capstone requirement. Departments without a capstone requirement have chosen not to make a statement about the program of study for their history majors; that is, students usually have to take a series of upper-division lecture-based courses and a smaller number of senior-level proseminar type courses. The arbitrary selection of courses that students make reflects what the department offers in any given semester or year—perhaps who is or who is not on sabbatical leave—and determines the meaning of the history degree. Departments that require a senior capstone usually require students to produce a major semester-long research project. This requirement reflects what faculty members do—we study, we research, and we publish the results of that research. But most undergraduate history majors will not become college and university history faculty. Most will enter into other careers, such as middle-school and high-school history teaching, law, library science, museum work, and fields not seemingly well-related to their history major. For many undergraduates, the major research project requires skills and commitment they may not possess or involves them in a process about which they are not entirely comfortable. Thus they do not gain the benefits history faculty hope the assignment will provide them.

I would like to suggest a different type of capstone course that has proven both interesting and rewarding to me and to students at both my previous and current institution. The range of assignments, in total, equals or perhaps exceeds the requirements of the typical semester-long research paper. The range, however, is more varied and more reflective of what students might do upon graduation, and offers a formative as well as summative development and evaluation process. I require students to submit a different assignment every three weeks—for a total of five such assignments—selected from a list of eight to ten different kinds of small projects that I give them. We then discuss what they will do to satisfy the assignment. The goal is to reflect better the range of work that students might do using their history baccalaureate degree.

Students must propose and I need to approve topics on a consistent theme—e.g., modern Japanese history, the American Civil War, women during wartime, and so forth—based on courses I have taught and areas in which I have done research and publication. Allowing students to select their own theme for the semester makes the various assignments more interesting to them, and it makes the range of assignments less threatening since they may select the broad area in which they are more knowledgeable, more comfortable, and more interested. I do limit them to areas in which I have some

knowledge; it would be silly for me to evaluate papers on medieval European history or modern African history since I neither teach nor research those areas. I could not offer students useful subject matter-related advice.

Please note that in completing five projects over the course of a semester, students will research, think about, gather information on, and write as much as they would in the typical senior-level seminar course. The goal is not to make the assignment easier; rather, it is to make it more relevant, more interesting, and, by dividing it into a series of building blocks rather than one large assignment, more useful. As you know, it is easier to write a paragraph than a monograph—breaking the monograph into chapters and each chapter into sections and each section into a series of paragraphs helps to demystify the process. And, given the requirement to submit work every three weeks, there is formative evaluation throughout the course if only because students receive summative evaluations every three weeks as they complete a project. Errors in conception, weaknesses in doing research, challenges in writing clearly and effectively will emerge in the first assignment, and we can discuss this to help strengthen awareness of good writing techniques for later assignments.

Currently, the topics I offer to students include the following:

1. writing a comparative book review;
2. preparing a research design for a major term research paper;
3. developing a grant proposal to a state or federal agency;
4. working for a museum as a docent;
5. responding to a part of the National Standards for History;
6. outlining a week's worth of lectures on a topic in history;
7. reporting on an historical event "live" as a journalist;
8. doing a simple oral history project;
9. drafting several related entries for an historical encyclopedia.

Each of the students in any given class must indicate the area—thematic or geographic—in which he or she wishes to submit work, and that area must reflect one of my teaching or research interests. I do not require the group each semester to agree on one theme or geographic area, and so in a given semester I might have a student working on topics in American military history and another on post-1600 Japanese history and so on, all of which is fine. I do like for them to consider working in groups or presenting their work on various assignments to classmates before giving them to me, since all of us benefit from good editors—colleagues, family members, and professional editors—without whom we likely would never publish. I do ask that they make at least one presentation to the entire class, usually later in the semester, because the more one practices presentation skills, the more proficient one becomes.

For the comparative book review, I suggest that students review and compare history books they already have read on a common topic or theme. Books from a prior history class are ideal. I give them a brief requirements sheet that discusses how to put this review together. I ask them to submit reviews electronically so that I can more easily edit and return them; they may resubmit the assignment for an improved grade. Typically this review results in a three to five-page paper. The comparative book review is useful

for any student thinking of a teaching career—in secondary schools, community colleges, or universities; it is a good assignment for future teachers to give to their own students, and thus it is useful for future teachers to practice it first. In permitting students to review books they have already read, they can complete the first assignment in the opening three weeks of the semester. We have an opportunity to discuss their skills at organizing a brief paper and writing that paper. Typically, I receive papers that reflect books they used for a previous history course or perhaps read for a previous history research paper, and that is perfectly acceptable. Students often hesitate to reach judgments on what they have read, so this assignment helps them move past that barrier. I encourage them to think about the books they have read: Are they well written? Did the arguments make sense? Were there photographs, charts, or maps to help them follow the argument?

This assignment also helps to foster a discussion about the basics of good writing. I urge students to use the grammar and spelling checkers that most word processing programs provide. In Microsoft "Word," for example, students can choose "Tools," "Options," "Spelling and Grammar," and finally "Readability Statistics." Once finished with the spelling and grammar check, "Word" provides a summary—number of words, sentences and paragraphs, and the resulting percentage of passive sentence constructions, Flesch Reading Ease (a scale from 99.9 to 0.01 where a lower score implies a more complex sentence structure, and a score in the 30s would indicate good, complex, thoughtful prose), and Flesch-Kinkaid Grade Level (the highest grade level is 12.0 and good writing should result in a level between 11.0 and 12.0). I focus initially on the elements of good writing to help students think carefully and consciously about their writing style and to focus on the weaknesses that all of us have to one extent or another. Too many students write awkwardly, use too many passive verb constructions, and lack good command of language. The spelling and grammar checks help them think about their writing.

For research design, students select a topic, perform a search in the university library, and write up a design that includes the working hypothesis, the primary and secondary resources they found and believe are appropriate, and a description of how they would proceed to do the actual research and write the resulting paper if, indeed, they were doing such an assignment. In other words, they engage in the initial process of performing the term paper research project, but stop before they begin the real detailed work. Years ago I put together a twelve-page single-spaced handout of tips on how to complete a ten-to-fifteen page term research paper assignment; I use some of that advice in the research design, which is the heart of the longer research paper assignments.

Students have submitted research designs on a great many interesting topics. These include "the British use of changing weapons technology in the nineteenth century," which very recently became the student's master's thesis, "women and the U.S. home front," "Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb," "the May 4th Movement and the Birth of Modern Chinese Nationalism," "the Opium Wars," and "Japan's turn to militarism in the 1930s."

To be honest, students have not often selected this option because, I think, they were not as comfortable with research papers as they would like to have been, and a research design incorporates the initial phases of a research paper. Still, I think this is a good option because it helps students learn better the elements of a research paper, and the more practice they have, the more proficient they can become, especially in conceptualizing the process and the steps they need to take.

For the grant proposal, students receive a copy of the requirements for a typical summer stipend proposal for the National Endowment for the Humanities and suggestions on how to find websites for United States Department of Education curriculum development proposals. I also tell them that presidential libraries typically host grant competitions to provide travel support and urge them to review those programs and requirements as well. Many undergraduate history majors might wind up in jobs that will require them to fill out and submit grant applications or, if in business, respond to "Requests for Proposals" [RFPs]. This is a useful exercise to draft a proposal, understand the typical categories [e.g., narrative, objectives, outcomes, etc.], and demystify somewhat the process of applying for grants. The grant proposal is one of the choices that students do not complete particularly well, and frankly it is not an assignment they often choose. After all, where would the average undergraduate students gain practice at writing grant proposals? But it remains a good learning exercise. After all, many of us have served on grant panels and received proposals that seemed hurried or not well thought out or did not fit requirements of the grant category. I can only remember about a half a dozen or so submissions in this category, but I persist in offering it.

The "museums or historical sites" assignment is meant to be a flexible one. History graduates might work as paid staff or volunteers in museums, historical sites, and other similar places. I believe it is important to introduce the idea of community service and to encourage those students willing to volunteer to work at a museum to fulfill this category. The results for this option have been interesting and satisfying. In Denver, some years ago, several students volunteered for a rather large exhibit that the Denver Museum of Natural History hosted on Aztec society at the time when the Spanish conquistadors arrived. Students had to memorize a great deal of material to serve as docents and they submitted that material and the resulting talks they had outlined for the assignment. They had great fun and helped contribute to the community. More recently, one student, who was a member of the U.S. Army National Guard, obtained permission from the base museum director to rewrite some of the display cards at the museum on the base where he was stationed. Another student, who was studying to become a high school world history teacher, came into the main office with a bed sheet over her normal clothes wrapped to look somewhat like a kimono, and she performed a credible version of the Japanese tea ceremony to the great amusement of several secretaries and me. She then submitted her research and notes. And, because I teach military history, I have found there are always students willing to come to class dressed in their Civil War re-enactment uniforms and discuss the uniforms, the weaponry, food, and so forth, and that too is great fun.

Students intending to become secondary social science or history teachers have found that National Standards for History a challenge. I admit that I too find the National Standards rather imposing. I downloaded the standards from the web, and I broke them down into constituent parts—e.g., Chinese history or Japanese history. I have tried to figure the time that typical ninth-grade world history courses in Iowa high schools allow, for example, for units on Japanese history, and then I try to see if I could teach to the national standards in the available time. I cannot imagine how any teacher could possibly meet many of the standards without racing through one's written notes at breakneck speed and with little thought for student understanding and/or comprehension. Especially for those students who are seeking secondary social science certification, it is useful for them to consider how they would teach to those standards and react to them—the standards in a specific area—as if they were assigned as part of a high school's reaction and study for a possible school board inquiry.

Students often have undertaken this assignment, and they have submitted papers on how they might meet the standards in the number of contact hours they could devote to that country or era in history. I would not argue that they succeed in their presentation, but the assignment helps acquaint them with the idea of history as continuous and the need to think both about how to break up a course into parts and how to relate those parts to one another and the overall theme of the course.

Outlining a week's worth of lectures on a topic in history is a good and useful exercise. I frequently tell very good students enrolled in my upper-division courses that, in areas in which they are interested and about which they are knowledgeable, they could likely give a better single lecture than I can (and I take great pride in my class presentations). But the real mark of a good classroom instructor is relating one day to the lectures that preceded that day and to the lectures that will follow since history is linked by chronology, themes, and so forth. Again, I let them pick the general topic, and together we discuss how to set boundaries for a week's worth of lectures and how to determine the elements of a good classroom presentation. Then they have to research their respective topics, outline the material they want to present, identify the learning points, and decide how it would tie into what most logically would precede and follow their unit. I like them to have lectures and discussion notes, an outline for students, and a map or maps where appropriate and useful.

Students have outlined sections on the American War for Independence, the Vietnam War, the turbulent sixties, China during the cultural revolution, the "floating world" of seventeenth-century Japan, the American Civil War, women in medieval Japan, and a great many other topics. One student wrote me some years after the class that he used some of these outlines when he began teaching high school history in a Denver-area suburb.

Students may choose to "file" a report on a historical event "live" as a daily news journalist might do. I do not require them to write in the style of the time in which they are reporting. I suggest that they submit a news story or a news editorial of typical length—perhaps 750 words—on a specific topic that fits within the theme or geographic area or time frame they have selected for the course. Students have submitted good

newspaper reports on various battles, on U.S. election campaigns, on declarations of war, and on Prohibition and booze running. Students also have submitted good editorials on similar topics, for example, exhorting women to take non-traditional jobs during World War II, supporting the Union in the "up south" during the days leading up to the Civil War, and promoting a liberal position during the "Let 100 Flowers Bloom" campaign in China during the late 1950s.

Years ago, Howard K. Smith, a noted reporter from the early days of television, gave a well-attended talk at my previous institution. During the question-and-answer session following his formal remarks, in responding to a question from a journalism major, he said that journalism students would benefit most from taking as many history courses as they could because understanding history, he suggested, is the key to being a good journalist. Many journalism majors take history courses, and this assignment helps bridge some of the distance between people who must report and comment at the moment, which is always difficult, and those who can put some distance between themselves and an event and have time for historical reflection. The tenets of good writing, whether in history or in journalism (or just about any field), are similar, and so I thought this to be a useful assignment.

The oral history project has followed a similar track for most students. Many students who select this option interview family members, while others—often students from small towns (fairly common at any current institution)—interview neighbors, friends, or other residents about some event in their lifetimes. We talk briefly about taking accurate notes, checking accuracy with the interviewee, doing a little background research to prepare for the interview (which is one reason that interviewing family members makes for an easier assignment), and outlining questions prior to the interviews.

The results have been fun to read and to hear. One student some years ago submitted a wonderful paper based on interviews with his grandmothers, both of them from Kansas, who criticized Franklin Roosevelt as President for not keeping better control of his wife, Eleanor! Another student submitted a paper based on interviews with his paternal grandparents who were celery farmers in the Denver suburb of Arvada and who complained for years after they gave up their farm about "imported" California celery not being as good nor as dark green as what they produced. Another student interviewed all of his living, older adult male relatives because every one of them volunteered for service in the military and he, an NROTC member, wondered why they all felt so obligated to serve. He learned that his male ancestors from Norway and Sweden also had volunteered to serve their respective countries. The usual outcome of these papers is a nice time for families to speak with one another across generations, and that can be a good project for high school teachers to use in class.

Drafting several related entries for historical encyclopedias represents a real source of professional development and publication for faculty members employed at teaching-oriented institutions and for advanced graduate students. The resulting encyclopedias are useful resources for high school and college students. They help outline topics and suggest where to turn for additional information. They are good examples of scholarship in support of teaching, as the late Ernest Boyer wrote, and the profession should credit

such work. Students often find that writing 500 or 1,000 words on a specific, rather narrow issue with a few listed and relevant sources can be an interesting and challenging experience. Writing a tight short narrative is a tremendous skill, and that ability to summarize a complex issue in a clear and succinct manner (an important critical-thinking skill) can help in virtually any career that involves some kind of writing.

To set up this activity, I have shared some of my submissions written for historical encyclopedias. I try to point out different steps in the process: thinking of the topic, doing the research, and then writing and later proofing the encyclopedia entry. I also use submissions from other historians to show how one does brief submissions, medium-length entries, and longer, more involved pieces.

I ask students to submit three to five entries on a related topic. That is, they submit three to five entries of 500 words each or two entries of 1,000 words. In previous years, I have received entries on American Civil War battles, Vietnam War campaigns, popular culture fads, Sino-Japanese relations, and many other topics. One student, who subsequently enrolled in graduate school in history, updated some of his entries and had them published in a recent encyclopedia on military history.

In conclusion, I believe that this approach to the history capstone course has advantages over more typical practices in history departments. For those departments that have no senior capstone experience, this seminar course proposal makes a statement about the usefulness of a history baccalaureate degree and shows the versatility of the thinking, conceptual writing, and research skills that an undergraduate history major would acquire through the course of a history-based education.

For those departments that currently require a major term research project, this alternative proposal better recognizes the world into which most history majors will enter once they earn their undergraduate degree. Of course, the proposed course reflects a view that the history major does not necessarily lead to graduate school in history and that might represent a difficult adjustment for some history departments.

For students, this approach involves a series of steps, with the opportunity for both formative and summative evaluations. In this proposed capstone students go beyond traditional experiences—that is completing their entire assignment, from selecting a topic, performing research, organizing notes, writing the resulting paper, and submitting the finished work, and then receiving their only evaluation at semester's end. Instead they do a variety of activities that provide formative feedback at several steps throughout the semester plus their summative evaluation (the grade) at the end. A baccalaureate degree in history prepares a student to succeed in many environments, and we should be justifiably proud of the good work we all do and the fine education we provide. I believe that this proposal for a new kind of history senior seminar helps make all of this clearer to students.