

CORRECTING THE COURSE: THE ASSESSMENT LOOP

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Background

In January 2002 President George W. Bush signed into law "An Act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind."¹ This "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) law expanded federal jurisdiction of elementary and secondary schooling in the United States, which, from the founding of this country until the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, had been under the sole jurisdiction of state and local governments. NCLB also mandated the states to set standards for students from kindergarten through twelfth grade and to develop standardized assessments of student learning in mathematics, English, and science. The law required improvements in schools where the majority of students were failing, and it also required states to provide for student transfers from schools with failing records to schools where students were meeting statewide assessment standards.

While the discipline of history was not part of NCLB, history and social studies had been included in earlier and ongoing federal initiatives to evaluate student learning, in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests developed as a result of Reagan administration initiatives in the Department of Education.² The NAEP tests did and still do include testing of students' knowledge of history facts. However, with the adoption of NCLB and its additional provisions for transfers and for attaching school funding to student performance levels in NCLB-mandated state tests, the result is that many teachers in school districts across the country teach to the English, math, and science tests and neglect history and the rest of the curriculum that is not subjected to NCLB scrutiny. The Department of Education provides Teaching American History (TAH) grants to fund programs proposed by local education agencies and their history partners to promote "traditional American history."³ But TAH programs often have limited application, and nowhere do they compensate for the losses that social studies teaching and learning have suffered from programs that redirect curriculum, teaching time, and educational resources to meet NCLB standards. While all these programs deal with federal standards and state and local oversight of K-12 learning, post-

¹Public Law 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf>.

²For information on NAEP's history and programs, see <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

³The teaching American History Congressional initiative was introduced and championed by U.S. Senator William F. Byrd (D-West Virginia).

secondary assessment plans are underway that will affect the teaching and learning of history and other disciplines and interdisciplinary studies in American colleges and universities.

In the fall of 2006 the United States Department of Education, headed by Secretary Margaret Spellings, issued a lengthy report, "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Course of American Higher Education."⁴ The report begins by noting that the federal government has made no significant decisions on American higher education since World War II when Congress passed the GI Bill of Rights and that American college and university graduates are falling behind graduates in math and the sciences at peer institutions in other countries, including nations with considerably fewer resources and far less stable pasts than the U.S. Then it calls for American colleges and universities to improve performance levels and to demonstrate that they are doing so. The report also recommends tying institutional accreditation—which ties to federal funding—to overall assessments of student learning in these public and private colleges and universities. Implicit in the Spellings Report is the message that if colleges and accrediting agencies continue to fail in their mission to ensure competitive learning in America's post-secondary institutions, then the federal government should take measures to correct this problem. Also implicit in the report is the suggestion that poorly- and non-performing schools should lose federal funding.

Recently the National History Center, with support from the Teagle Foundation, has convened several extraordinary conversations on history and history teaching and the differences in how history departments and history professors and how history education departments and education professors perceive what is and should be taught in the history classroom.⁵ These meetings have suggested there are common grounds shared by some members of history and education departments, and that, if we historians do not embrace assessment on our own terms, others will impose assessment standards—and teaching agendas—upon us and our colleagues in the other academic disciplines. These standards will be enforced by accrediting agencies and those who choose to ignore them will risk losing accreditation and federal funding tied to accreditation.

Those of us who teach history at the post-secondary level know full well that our students are learning history and acquiring an understanding of how the past ties with the present. We know that in our courses students come to understand the importance of civic engagement and the consequences of disengagement. We know that history

⁴See <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf>.

⁵For information on the conferences, see <http://www.nationalhistorycenter.org/conferences.html>. The National History Center was created by the American Historical Association in 2002 as "a public trust dedicated to the study and teaching of history, as well as to the advancement of historical knowledge in government, business and the public at large." For more information on the NHC, go to <http://www.nationalhistorycenter.org/index.html>.

students learn to do research and to document their sources and that in writing and documenting papers they become better, more responsible, and more effective communicators. We watch them learn; we see them grow; and we hear them say that what they have learned from us has transformed them and equipped them for many life challenges.

But we are not inclined to document what we do or what our students learn. Savoring our academic freedom and preferring to use our time for intellectual and pedagogical pursuits and for community service, we see no need to underscore the obvious. However, others do, and since they do and since what they do could profoundly affect history teaching, we historians must establish clear criteria for what we want our students to learn. We must write, distribute, and post syllabi that clearly present student learning outcomes and clear explanations of the pathways by which students can meet our learning outcomes. We must also provide clear and compelling evidence that our students are learning history in such a way that they meet the general outcomes for learning set by our institutions in manners that are consistent with our institution's mission statement and general standards. We must demonstrate that we are consciously mindful that we are always assessing our work and our students' work and we are using what we learn from assessment to improve our programs and our students' learning.

If we choose not to make our students' learning and our effective teaching obvious in ways the state and federal agencies expect, college administrators and bureaucrats running state higher education agencies—who often have not studied history but allege that history has remained the domain of old white men teaching about older white men—will take over. They take a “one-size-fits-all” approach to general education and they see teachers as facilitators and generalists, not experts. They profoundly disagree with those of us who hold that teachers should be experts in their disciplines, sources of information in the classroom, and leaders and guides in learning. They would like to send us and our courses to the margins and homogenize our curricula. They would have us send our students forth with little understanding of how to do history well, how to research what happened in the past, how to interpret past events and know how issues have been changed by subsequent generations of historians, and understand why history matters and how it fits with other disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge.

The recent focus on assessment and tying assessment to accreditation and funding requires those of us who teach post-secondary history courses to assess history learning and to provide clear evidence that students benefit from our conscious efforts to improve their learning. We know that disciplinary learning works and that disciplinary learning is essential for successful interdisciplinary learning. We know that experts are needed to train the next generation of experts, and that business, industry, government, and non-profits still require and recruit experts in their fields. We know that while learning history, our students meet many general education outcomes in the process, and that in our classes students improve critical learning skills,

research skills, writing skills, other communication skills, and even technical skills. Our administrators, consultants, and outside accrediting teams know it too, but they expect us to document student learning as carefully as we document articles and monographs. If we historians and other teachers of the humanities, arts, and sciences don't frame assessment the way we want it and the generalists understand it, others will frame assessment, pedagogy, and course content and outcomes for us. The U.S. Department of Education, state offices of education, and schools of education will frame the standards for our courses, give us our course outcomes, and tell us how we must measure student mastery of these outcomes. We will teach what they want us to teach, to the outcomes they mandate for us, and we will lose control over what and how we teach in our disciplines.

To move on this front and to ensure that our history program sets and upholds the standards we set for teaching and learning history at North Seattle Community College, our history team developed history learning outcomes that reflect and complement the institution's general education outcomes and provide the means for students to achieve those goals.⁶ We have designed, within our limits, a comprehensive departmental assessment program. The feedback we get from the sources we tap indicates how we and our students are doing and allows us to further improve history instruction at North. Our team members understand history and history teaching; we have made strong and deep commitments to the students we teach. We work together to set and meet expectations, and in the process we assess each other's work and our own and we improve the teaching we do in campus-based and online U.S. history and world history courses.

What follows is an overview of our department's assessment program and how we use it to report internally and externally on what we do to evaluate our program as well as its parts and to improve instruction in history. Our program is particular to history, but much of what we do could be modified by other institutions and disciplines.⁷

History Assessment within the Institutional Setting

At the basic level, assessment involves grading. To that end, like all of you, we read tests, papers, reports, and assignments and assign grades to individual students for specific courses. We ask students to evaluate some of their courses and some of their

⁶Besides the author, other members of the department are Scott Rausch, Ph.D., who teaches world, U.S., Latin American, and Asian history on campus and online; Brian Casserly, Ph.D., who teaches U.S., environmental, and Pacific Northwest history on campus and online; and Chiemi Ma, M.A., who teaches U.S. and world history surveys online.

⁷To get a sense of how we assess student learning in History at North Seattle Community College, see our website, "Assessing Student Learning in History at North Seattle Community College" at <https://frontpage.northseattle.edu/nutting/history%20learning%20and%20assessment.htm>.

instructors every quarter. But we acknowledge that there is a lot more to assessment—from peers, administrators, and outside evaluators.

In 1995 the Seattle Community College district developed a common academic transfer curriculum for our Associate of Arts (A.A.) and Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree candidates. To that end, they adopted a set of general education outcomes for all our campuses and for basic areas of emphasis—such as individuals and society, visual, literary, performance and the arts, mathematics and the sciences. North Seattle Community College instructors then went further to develop their own criteria for special designation courses meeting some of the articulated outcomes.

In 2005 when the district revised its general education programs, committees at North Seattle made further revisions to campus standards. To that end, they adopted thirteen education outcomes dealing with skills, knowledge, and attitudes.⁸ Admittedly these outcomes need work; most of them simply cannot be measured. However, they guide our general education program, and students in Associate of Arts and Associate of Applied Sciences degree programs are required to take courses that meet the different outcomes. As good citizens, we historians submit to our Committee on Academic Standards (CAS) rule that we select only three of the general education outcomes from the skills and knowledge categories.⁹ In course syllabi we highlight these general education outcomes and explain their meaning in clear language in terms of learning and working in our courses. To that end, we design assignments and examinations to ensure that students are working towards mastering the outcomes; we list outcomes on assignments; and, at the end of each term, we ask students in each course to evaluate the assignments, the course, and their own work in the course. We also ask them to evaluate the instructional materials and strategies we used in our courses. From this feedback and from our evaluation of students' work, we determine what worked and what did not and then adjust or revise foci, readings, and activities to improve student learning.

We also list *history learning outcomes* for each course that both reflect and integrate with general education outcomes and ensure that students learn the history, historical interpretations, and methods we want them to learn in a history course. Many

⁸The thirteen outcomes suggest that the committee came up with a compromise that most committee members accept, a compromise that also ensured some enrollments in traditionally low-enrolled courses and programs.

⁹Go to <https://frontpage.north-seattle.edu/CAS/PDF/2005GeneralEducationOutcomesNSCC.pdf> to see these thirteen general education outcomes. This year CAS voted to limit all courses to three general education outcomes. A review of the list clearly suggests that if history students are meeting ONLY THREE of these outcomes in any of our courses, they are not learning history very well. But the thirteen outcomes remain because this compromise was the best that people could agree to and, at the same time, ensure that some poorly enrolled courses would get some students. This policy provides an example of what bureaucratic assessment does at a cost to disciplines and to student learning.

of the specific skills we focus on (research, writing, map-reading, interpreting census data, documenting sources, and the like) are integral to success in other disciplines.

History learning outcomes would include the following:

Identify and properly cite (Chicago Style) print, media, and online history sources.

Integrate information and analysis from different reliable print and online primary and secondary sources to explain different historical issues, events, and personalities in papers, examinations, and class presentations.

Locate on maps the sites where major events in history took place; explain how the geography of a region affected political, social, economic, and cultural developments in that region; read and use graphs, charts, and other data-based reports to explain historical trends and developments.

Provide a clear narrative of historical developments and issues within a set period of time in history; place that narrative within the wider scope of world and human history.

Write clear, comprehensive, well-supported history research papers and reviews that respect the conventions of grammar and punctuation.

Demonstrate in writings and oral presentations that historical interpretations change over time and in light of newfound sources.

Demonstrate in discussion and essay writing a clear understanding of and appreciation for the diversity of different men's and women's experiences within their own communities and within the U.S. or the world during particular time periods.

Successfully frame, explain, and grapple with the complexity of historical issues.

History Assessment within Our Classrooms

Students are introduced to and reminded of these outcomes when we distribute syllabi and assignments, and they are given opportunities to reflect on them as they work and as they evaluate our assignments, what and how we teach, and how effectively we teach, and how well they and their classmates learned and worked. At the beginning of our courses we also perform a diagnostic test that gives us some indication not only of students' prior knowledge of the subject, but of their ability to write simple statements of what something was and why it matters in history. In some classes we re-administer the diagnostic to see how much they advanced in both mastering the material and presenting it clearly, concisely, and effectively.

Throughout the class we do ongoing assessments and solicit student feedback concerning research and writing assignments, and we administer end-of-the-course evaluations tailored to the discrete courses. One assessment survey we designed and like particularly is the "What I Learned" survey we administer to U.S. history survey students at the end of the term. Since student responses are both qualitative and quantitative, we end up with considerable material to analyze. Unfortunately, we have had neither the released time, support personnel, or funding to do anything with these

data formally, but we routinely use this type of student feedback to discuss and revise courses, reading, and assignments, and to tweak assessment forms. Nor do we have the resources to contact these students (who have given us long-term contact information and permission to use it), to get a long-range perspective of the learning that goes on in our history courses.

Students are also involved in both self-assessment and peer assessment in our courses. In general discussion groups, they evaluate group members' contributions to these weekly activities; these evaluations translate into part of each student's grade. Students are also required to assess their own work on major projects and in the course. We also use these student responses to revise student assessment forms and to improve group learning activities and the information resources that students work with.

Members of our history program have also designed interdisciplinary programs linking history with literature, economics, political science, anthropology, and information services, and we have provided the same assessment guidelines and tools for these links.¹⁰ In addition to these interdisciplinary studies links, we have worked directly with our social science librarians, who provide information literacy diagnoses of our students, orient them to information resources specific to history, maintain library websites for each of our history courses, and work daily with students to assist them in developing the skills and understanding we require of history students, college library users, and informed citizens. We develop and refine learning assessment tools with these librarians as well.

History Assessment for Internal and External Reviews

There are two other areas of assessment that do not often tie to course assessment, but it is critical that they do. These are program reviews and accreditation self-studies. Ideally, these reports should integrate with and inform each other along with the assessment information we get from our courses. Since 1999, when I wrote my first department program review, after soliciting feedback from my history colleagues, I included a general assessment of our program—its strengths and deficiencies in terms of course offerings, faculty strengths, library holdings, student successes and failures, and so forth. I followed this summary with short range (one-year) and long-range (five-year) plans for improvement based on the information we had collected. When I wrote the follow-up 2005 program review, I revisited the 1999 document, took the planning parts and integrated them into the 2005 review, along with a summary of what had been done that had been proposed, how, and by whom. I also summarized what had been proposed but not done, and why proposed actions had not

¹⁰For one example of a linked course at North Seattle CC, see Maureen Murphy Nutting, "The Linked Course: A Viable Option for Teaching and Learning History," *Teaching History*, 26:1 (Spring 2001), 3-12.

been taken. To that I added projects that had not been proposed in 1999 but accomplished since then, explained why they had been done, and by whom. This summary noted personnel changes; course additions and deletions; interdisciplinary course initiatives that were developed, continued, or discontinued; special projects; responses to campus-driven initiatives; and problems that endured. To be honest, one problem that emerged was that since several members of the general faculty who were not historians had control of history courses, we did not have oversight of all the "history" offerings. These "outside" instructors of "history" courses do not articulate any history learning outcomes; they do not require students to develop information literacy competencies or to use standard history documentation; nor do they use any of our general history assessment tools and materials.

The program review process and the data we included to support our findings helped our team closely evaluate our general history program, develop short- and long-term plans for history in the coming years, and lobby the administration to take action to strengthen the history program. Minimal progress has been made on this front.

We also realized that our program would benefit from external review by historians from other institutions, and to that end we brought in history experts to evaluate our work and our efforts to do what we claim to do and to improve what it is that we do. William Weber, professor of History at California State University Long Beach, one-time editor of the journal *The History Teacher*, and then Vice President of the American Historical Association's Teaching Division, visited our classes in 2001. He reviewed our 1999 self-study, spoke with individual faculty members and administrators, and later provided a formal written report. In 2004, Stephanie Camp, associate professor of African American and women's history at the University of Washington, reviewed what we were doing to address diversity issues with our diverse student populations. She examined course outlines and syllabi for U.S. Cultures (diversity) classes, observed our teaching, and spoke with participating department members individually and collectively before writing a formal report. We have also benefitted from meetings in May 2007 with representatives of the Northwest Commission of Colleges and Universities, and found their observations and questions helpful in framing the work we have done since then.

Assessment Challenges

These assessment parts have fit together well for the history team and history students at North Seattle Community College. Yet some elements of assessment are missing, some we are aware of and others we have not detected.

One challenge we face is actually figuring out what our students are learning about history, information literacy, critical reading, and expository writing. We need to find out what specifically from history enriches their general education and assists them in later academic and technical courses, the workforce, and in civic life. With students who often come to take one or two courses and others who at best complete

two-year programs, we have little time and few resources to track students at our own institution, to conduct exit interviews that address these questions, or to follow them as they move on to four-year institutions and into the workforce. What we learn about how their studying with us has affected their learning and their behavior after they leave us generally comes from what they reveal in emails, graduation announcements, and personal notes. During visits to campus, alumni tell us how they used what they learned from us and how they built on our foundations. From our "What I Learned" responses, we have archived six years worth of long-term contact information for former students, but we have no funds or administrative support to do any follow-up work. In our state, the transfer universities do not track this kind of information; they simply report graduation rates for community college transfers.

Another challenge we face is aligning our general education and history outcomes and assessment work with what history colleagues develop at other community colleges and four-year transfer institutions. We have had fruitful exchanges and collaborations with historians in local community colleges, but there has been no discussion across transfer lines and little work has been done in terms of assessment of student learning by history departments in four-year colleges and universities where our students transfer to do upper-division work in the disciplines. A conversation between community college historians and these history colleagues in the transfer institutions needs to begin, and collaborations on assessment initiatives need to take place to ensure that community college students are working towards developing the same skills and areas of knowledge as students taking lower-division history courses in the four-year colleges and transfer universities.

We need to assess our own work better. How well are we teaching and preparing our classes? How effective are the instructional materials we develop and use in our classrooms? How solid are the distance learning courses we deliver? What and how are we doing to stay current with new scholarship in our fields and integrate it into our courses? How well do we function as team members engaged in departmental and division work to foster teaching and learning? What should we be doing consciously to document and assess our own work and when should we be doing it?

While regional accreditation teams address some of these issues in formal visits and reviews, these visits are few and far between. While they make recommendations, institutions have considerable latitude in acting on them. For example, an accrediting team from the Northwest Commission of Colleges and Universities visited North Seattle over a year ago, and months later, in their formal report, commended historians at North for doing exemplary work at completing the assessment loop and improving history instruction for our students; they also noted that, while there is evidence of good assessment work in pockets at the school, the college needed to develop an institutional plan for assessment and to provide evidence that the plan was improving learning for all of our students. When responding to this charge, administrators chose to disregard the "exemplary work" done by its history faculty and come up with some plan that makes no use of our program. But then historians are not in the forefront of many

education initiatives. In fact, so far, the professional organizations that serve historians have done little work to promote accreditation work by historians. However, American Historical Association President Gabriella Spiegel, charged the members to take this work seriously or suffer the consequences of their disengagement.¹¹

Locally, our history faculty will continue to use, evaluate, and modify the assessment work we are doing and reach out to our partners' history departments in transfer institutions. We believe that by doing so we can improve history teaching and learning in our college and perhaps encourage others to improve it in transfer institutions as well as in the K-12 systems; we also realize that if and when we cease these efforts, others who know and care little about history and history teaching will start telling historians what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess the teaching and learning of history. We know the history of "No Child Left behind" and we have read the Spellings Report and we have learned much from both. These challenges to history's place in general education and across college curricula raise serious concerns about the future of history learning in lower and higher education. In many places history has lost its rightful place in the center of higher education. Many students, after learning little to no history in the K-12 grades, take no history courses and learn no history in college. Many academic administrators, legislators, and educational policymakers are willing to consign history to the dustbins and focus on math, science, reading, and writing, failing to see how history instruction develops students' critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, and plays a critical role in developing informed, articulate, and constructive citizens.

If I had my druthers, I would prefer to focus on teaching history, not on detailing how and how well we teach it, not on measuring student learning, not on developing rubrics and writing reports. But critical times call for crucial actions, and we must do what we must do. In the process, we can generate evidence that we do what we say we do very well, and we can present compelling findings that underscore history's centrality to anyone's general education. Perhaps by doing so we will persuade some policymakers to restore history to the central place it deserves in the curriculum and in the general education of our citizens.

There is another question: Who benefits from this work we do? Well, we do. We learn from close examination of our work and the work of our students. And if we do something with what we learn to improve how we teach and how our students learn, everyone else benefits: those who learn from us, those who teach us, those who work with us and play with us, and those who share with us the challenges and opportunities that come with understanding the past and using that understanding to shape the future.

¹¹See Gabriella Spiegel, "A Triple 'A' Threat: Accountability, Assessment, Accreditation" in *Perspectives on History* (March 2008), available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0803/0803pre1.cfm>.