

Fitchburg State University History Program Review

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The review of the History program at Fitchburg State University took place on April 23, 2018. The reviewer met with members of the campus academic leadership team, including the Provost and the Dean of Arts and Sciences, with the history faculty and the chair (also a historian), and with students from the Department of Economics, History, and Political Science. It was evident throughout the day that the History program is well-regarded on campus and the faculty's efforts to maintain a strong program and to work collaboratively within the program and across campus for their students' benefit have been successful.

The History program within the Department of Economics, History, and Political Science includes nine faculty members who are all committed scholars and teachers. As a group, the History faculty have expertise in a wide range of specializations across chronological, geographical, and thematic areas. In the last five years, faculty members have presented their work at conferences and published many articles and several books. Their productivity is especially notable given the high (4-4) teaching load and service on campus, to the community, and to the profession. The History program offers an impressive range of courses for undergraduate and graduate students, and History faculty are committed to improving students' analytical, rhetorical, and communication skills as well as their understanding of historical knowledge.

History is a foundational discipline within the liberal arts, and this is especially important given Fitchburg State's mission as a public university committed to the liberal arts and sciences as well as professional education. It is important to recognize the History program's contributions to the general education curriculum and to students in other majors who are interested in the minor or elective courses. At its core, the discipline of History builds knowledge and develops analytical and communication skills. It recognizes the complexity of the human experience in constructing arguments based on multiple types of evidence. At the university, student success in History courses within the general education program is a reliable indicator of four-year graduation rates. This suggests that the skills students learn in History courses early in their college careers increases their ability to succeed in other courses and graduate on time.

The program also should be recognized for its innovative teaching. Historians at Fitchburg State teach a wide range of courses with a number of innovative methods, including role-playing games, the use of virtual reality headsets, and team teaching with faculty from other disciplines. A number of students mentioned that these were some of the best experiences they have had at Fitchburg State. Students in History classes also have opportunities to develop historical thinking skills through the unique experience of archival research. The recent library renovation was

thoughtful in its inclusion of instruction space and an archives reading room that could accommodate an undergraduate class. Recruitment and retention efforts could emphasize the wide range of courses available and also highlight these diverse opportunities the program provides for its students.

All of the students that the reviewer spoke with noted their appreciation for the History faculty's expertise and commitment to teaching. Several of the undergraduates, some of whom were close to graduation, mentioned faculty members and specific experiences that had especially helped them to develop intellectually. Some of the students have been inducted into Phi Alpha Theta (the History honor society) or participated in role-playing activities outside of class. Their enthusiasm was notable. One former student, who recently completed an MA in History, found that even the courses he took that are not directly relevant to the subject he teaches in a public middle school helped him become a better teacher.

The History program works closely with several other departments and programs on campus. Historians contribute to several interdisciplinary minors. The most significant collaboration is with the Education Department. That department and the History program faculty work closely together to ensure a smooth process for undergraduates interested in licensure for middle and secondary teaching. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has recently instituted changes to the licensure requirements that will be effective beginning in July 2019, and the faculty from these two programs have made appropriate adjustments so students will be prepared. Undergraduates pursuing careers in History education can choose a minor in History Secondary Education with a licensure track or with a non-licensure track; the latter is an excellent option for those interested in teaching outside the public school setting.

These options for the minor are recent changes to the History program. Other changes to the program in the last five years include the transformation of the required sophomore methods course into two semester-long courses and the elimination of the distribution requirement within the major for students to take electives in World, European, and U.S. history. Based on evidence that students were not adequately prepared for senior research projects, the historians decided to make changes to the one-semester sophomore methods course. They eliminated that course and created two new courses to replace it and deepen students' preparation for their elective courses and their capstone project. The new sequence, HIST 2021-(Reading the Historical Landscape) and HIST 2022 (Constructing History) was approved only very recently, so the History program will surely assess the effectiveness of the change over the coming years. Alongside that assessment, the program would be well-advised to consider whether students are still taking a range of elective courses that includes the study of non-western areas now that the distribution requirement has been eliminated. The administrative task of rationalizing course numbering, while onerous, should also be undertaken. For consistency, the faculty are advised to consider the extent and level of research and writing expectations as they evaluate and adjust course numbering.

The reviewer also spoke with several undergraduates majoring in History. Several were also pursuing a minor in History Secondary Education (all in the licensure track). Students were overall very positive about the program and faculty. They only expressed concerns about scheduling and about the secondary education minor. In terms of scheduling, they noted that as they became more advanced, it was more difficult to take electives because of the senior seminar or because of required education classes. If it is possible to adjust scheduling to avoid these conflicts, it would be helpful for students.

This conversation did reveal, however, that this group of students interested in becoming teachers has many insecurities about how their History and Education courses intersect. They noted that they feel prepared to be historians from their History courses, but that they want to be history teachers, not historians. Several of these students also noted that they do not think the second sophomore methods course, Constructing History, should be required of them. This is an advising issue, however, not a curriculum problem. They absolutely should be required to take both methods courses; without experience doing the work of historians, their effectiveness as teachers will be reduced. They also expressed concerns that their Education courses draw from many fields and that they are not sure how to apply some of the concepts from those classes to their future plans to teach at the middle school or high school level. This is an opportunity for improving advising, both in and outside of classes in the History program and in the Education department. The faculty should think about ways to increase students' understanding of the relevance of their undergraduate coursework to different careers, including (but not limited to) teaching. The program faculty could also consider whether it would be appropriate to allow students interested in education to occasionally have the alternative of writing a lesson plan or unit plan rather than completing certain traditional assignments. It would be a disservice to allow students to completely avoid learning how to complete regular assignments, but there may be situations in which a teaching-oriented option could be beneficial.

The program's faculty work closely with the library as well. The recent renovation of the library has made it an attractive space for students to study individually and in groups. Students in History courses attend research instruction sessions and those in some courses are able to work in the University archives, which moved to the library so that they are more accessible. One area that could be improved is in the History faculty's collaboration with the library to discuss collection management through both weeding and acquisitions. Developing strong communication between the library and the faculty will be essential to ensuring that the library's collection of print and ebooks and serials is balanced and appropriate to the program's needs.

Faculty members in History are active scholars, presenting and publishing their work in appropriate venues at a rate that is notable for a department with a high teaching and service load. It would be beneficial to the program and to the university if an occasional course release were available to reward and incentivize the faculty's research productivity. While this may be challenging because of campus norms and contractual obligations, it is a question worth revisiting periodically. The faculty and administration are encouraged to consider other ways of recognizing faculty productivity, including permitting faculty an occasional opportunity to teach

one section that is larger than standard instead of two smaller sections. With a mostly online MA program, it may not be possible to arrange for teaching assistants for certain sections, but that may be a possibility if there is a local MA student.

The faculty in the History program face a number of other challenges that could be remediated. Students with weak reading and writing skills when they arrive at Fitchburg State need continuing support to improve those skills. The History program could play an important role in assisting those students. Reading and writing are at the core of a historian's work and coordination between the program and the writing center could be very beneficial for these students as well as those who enter the university with a stronger academic preparation. There are a number of ways that this coordination could occur, such as a writing coach assigned to a specific survey course, or a first- or second-year History course that satisfies a general education requirement and works closely with the writing center. The program faculty and administration are encouraged to consider specific ways that they can improve students' reading and writing skills, as these are critical to their success in other courses as well.

The History program has also been affected somewhat by the national trend of declining enrollments. The program faculty should consider ways of attracting students to the major and actively marketing courses, especially electives, perhaps through a course fair. Some students may also be attracted by the possibility of completing both a BA and an MA, so promoting both together could be one of several ways of attracting students. Efforts to improve recruitment and retention can also focus on History's place in the liberal arts curriculum. They can reduce the number of course cancellations as well, which is a challenge for faculty because they are unpredictable. If the registrar and administrators can lessen the unpredictability of this, it would be helpful for faculty.

Overall, this review found a vibrant History program with committed and talented faculty. It offers a range of courses for the general education curriculum, for History majors and minors, and for middle and secondary education students. The program is innovative, wide-ranging, and central to the mission of a public university committed to the liberal arts. The faculty and administration are encouraged to continue to work together to maintain its strengths and build the program over the coming years as a foundation of the liberal arts.