History Looks Ahead: A Strategic Plan the for the History Department

Where We Have Been

The History Department has been fortunate in comparison to other social science and humanities departments at Stony Brook, in that we have survived the latest cycle of budget cuts without endangering our core missions of research and teaching. To be sure, we have some serious problems to face: gaping holes in coverage left by retirements and relocations of key faculty, escalating course sizes that reduce teaching effectiveness, diminished stipends and other resources for graduate students, and the strains of covering our many commitments to university's mission. But overall, we have weathered the budget storms of the last few years and are confident about our future.

Some signs of the department's good health: although still small in comparison to our public university peers , we have managed to stay approximately the same size over the past two decades. We have lost a few key faculty to other institutions (Klubock, Vaughan) but managed to retain others (Larson, Tomes, Wilson). For 2010-11, we have been authorized to hire a third Latin Americanist, which will stabilize one of our strongest areas of specialization. We have some unacceptable gaps in our coverage, most notably Africa and the Middle East. But we remain large enough to sustain our core missions in graduate and undergraduate teaching. The year before the budget crisis began in earnest, we made three outstanding hires at the assistant professor level (Anderson, Beverly, Farmer).

Scholarship:

The department maintains a strong culture of research and productivity. Nearly seventy percent of our tenured and tenure track faculty have won at least one major national fellowship or grant, and many more than one. All faculty are research active, as measured by recent publications in print or in press. We believe we have a strong national profile, and a good international one, especially in Latin America. Proving this assertion empirically is not exactly straightforward, however. In the US News rankings, which is based on reputation alone, we do not do well , scoring 71st out of some 90 programs considered. Binghamton is 64, Buffalo is 85, Albany is not ranked at all. This position is disappointing but hardly surprising. SBU is too young and too identified with the sciences for our department to put a dent in the traditional dominance of the private and public Ivies. We await (as does everyone else!) the long delayed NRC rankings, which attempt to make quality more of an issue in their measurements. In the last NRC ranking published in 1995, we came in 45th in the nation, not as bad as the US News ranking but not as good as we think we are. Significantly, in the 2000 Graham Diamond rankings--which deliberately excluded reputational rankings, controlled for department size, and emphasized rates of publication, external grant support, and citation rates-- we did spectacularly well: the Stony Brook History Department was ranked 4th among research universities.

Teaching:

The department also has a strong tradition of good teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate level. We have two Distinguished Teaching Professors and have several excellent candidates for that distinction in coming years. We attract many undergraduate majors and minors (639 as of mid-September 2010). Our courses serve the general educational needs of Stony Brook students. During the last academic year (2009-10), two thirds of the students in our undergraduate courses were there to

meet general education requirements. The History Department currently carries the great bulk of the general education load for the University's DEC categories I (European Traditions), J (World Beyond the West), and K (American Pluralism) as well as the entirety of the university's Skill 4 (American History) graduation requirement. The History major continues to be the most popular by far of all undergraduates seeking eventual certification as social studies teachers in secondary schools. The History minor is the most heavily patronized of Business majors.

A decade ago, we redesigned our graduate program to optimize our faculty's strengths and to pioneer the way toward a new kind of graduate training for new history doctorates. Instead of the traditional emphasis on geographic regions and time periods, our training stresses a thematic, theoretical approach to history that is well suited both to the current intellectual trends in the professional as well as the job market. Our areas of excellence include: Atlantic world history, new imperial history, Latin American history, environmental history, 18th c. history, the history of medicine, disease, and health , and transnational and comparative history.

The revised program has helped us recruit better graduate students and has generated considerable comment at national conventions of historians. Our graduate recruiting, however, continues to be hampered by our inability to compete with other programs financially, given the low stipends we can offer and the high living costs of Long Island--a particularly acute problem for our graduate students coming from abroad.

University Service:

Departments are usually keen to avoid the "service" label. We wear ours with pride. Besides the extensive commitments, noted above, to undergraduate education requirements, the History Department takes second place to none in terms of its active participation in university-wide endeavors in scholarship and teaching. Our faculty have been active and often central movers in such programs as Africana Studies, Asian and Asian-American studies, the Honors College, the Initiative for Historical Social Studies, the Humanities Institute, the Institute for Global Studies, the Latin American and Caribbean Center, the Professional Education Program, the undergraduate colleges, and Women's Studies--to name only a few. Faculty members have been key participants in university service and program committees, from revising the DEC to the Curriculum Committee, the Undergraduate Council, and, of special interest to us, library development.

Where We Hope to Go

What is the mission of the university in the twenty-first century? What is the role of the History Department in that mission? For the past millennium, western institutions of higher learning have pursued two goals: the collection and utilization of information and the quest to discover who we are. History, a discipline over two millennia old, is central to both. This will not change.

Contemporary pundits argue that information technology has been revolutionized by computer and internet. No doubt. But any more so than by printing? the telegraph? photography? And even if we now can access more information more quickly than ever before, what sense do we make of that information? History has always demanded the ability to access large amounts of data, typically through

archival research, the ability to analyze that data, and the skill to present the results of that analysis in terms that anyone can understand--otherwise known as the skill of writing well.

History also is central to understanding who we are, as immigrants, as worshippers, as workers, as citizens, as thinkers. The study of even the most distant pasts and most alien cultures can shed light on our identities today. The ability to see how others lived, in different places and different times, is vital to understanding how we live in our here and now.

The two central tasks of any History Department have been, are, and will be the teaching of human identity through comparison with our pasts and the teaching of how to access, analyze and synthesize large amounts of data in terms that anyone can understand.

How can we improve the ability of the History Department at Stony Brook to achieve these tasks?

Resolve the conflict between General Education and Major needs:

It would be foolish to even discuss bold new initiatives if these core objectives cannot be met under existing programs. At present, the History Department is not satisfied that it is meeting them, particularly for our undergraduate majors.

An ideal undergraduate history major program can tolerate large, relatively impersonal classes for the first year or two, content to introduce key themes, examination and analysis of documents, and brief writing exercises. But by the junior year, if not earlier, a history major belongs in classes no larger than a typical section, where s/he can read much longer, more demanding assignments, learn how to access documentary materials on his/her own, and write often and intensively.

This is currently impossible at Stony Brook. Even upper-division history courses, including senior seminars, are populated heavily by non-majors needing them for DEC or related-discipline major requirements. More to the point, these courses are simply populated heavily. A colleague remarked a little over twenty years ago (pre-DEC) that he could do handstands naked in his upper-division courses and they still would draw below forty students. Today they regularly have triple that number. There is, moreover, no prospect of relief. Every upper-division history course is filled to capacity immediately after pre-registration, whereupon commences much wailing and lamentation among undergraduates who must enroll somehow or delay graduation.

The department recently instituted major-only, writing-heavy 300-level courses, a step that addresses our majors' needs in only a limited way, yet one that still taxes departmental resources substantially. Hiring additional faculty, to bring us in line with other universities with the number of our undergraduates and undergraduate majors, would help address this dilemma. In the meantime, we will be reassessing our major and minor requirements with considerable urgency to do so.

Applying Graduate Program Strengths to the Undergraduate Major:

Our graduate program, as noted above, emphasizes transnational and comparative history. It moves our graduate students past chronological and national

boundaries. To be sure, many of our undergraduate courses do the same--on a course-by-course basis. In addition to revising our major curriculum with an eye to delivering better thinkers and writers, we intend to retool it to encourage the ongoing development of inter- and trans-national perspectives.

Review of the MAT program:

About five years ago, as part of the creation of the current Professional Education Program, the History Department assumed responsibility for the social studies education program. The program's integration into the department remains a work in progress. The program itself is valuable, but has had a sometimes negative impact on our graduate courses not unlike DEC on our undergraduate, with seminar enrollments of over twenty, and sometimes thirty(!) in our graduate courses. We do not have sufficient faculty to offer separate courses for the MAT and doctoral programs. The incentives offered for teaching MA students generate insufficient income to hire more faculty. So we need to think creatively about how to meet the needs of the MAT program without diluting the quality of our doctoral program.

Future of the Faculty:

We see no need to propose a new center, institute, or program, not at a time of concern about our ability to meet our core missions for our majors and doctoral students and within the university's undergraduate and graduate program requirements.

We do think we have been headed in the right direction in our faculty hires. We are about to tenure the first dedicated historian of Japan in the entire history of Stony Brook University. In another few years we hope to do so for the first of south Asia. Yet we have done so without sacrificing our absolute need to have a strong faculty in American history, and without diminishing special research excellence among our Europeanists of several eras as well as the continued prominence of our Latin American specialists. Our graduate program--and frankly our absolutely wonderful departmental culture and morale--ensure close cooperation among all of us, at least at the graduate level.

We are deeply concerned about our continued inability to provide any offerings at any level and virtually any era in Africa or the Middle East. Not only are these two areas of vital importance in themselves, but faculty hiring in them would also immediately benefit our doctoral and masters programs.

In conclusion, the main items on the History Department: for the next few years are as follows:

1. involve the whole department in the process of reviewing and refining this strategic plan.
2. collaborate with the Dean and other departments to try to find creative ways to finance new faculty lines in Africa and the Middle East, which the whole university needs
3. charge our undergraduate committee with conducting a review of our undergraduate major and minor, to see how they can be strengthened.
4. charge our graduate committee and SSE Director to review the integration of our SSE program into the History Department

5. work with the development office to identify external funding sources that can help us meet the need to enhance our competitive ability to attract graduate students.

6. create a new departmental committee for advancement to explore new methods of publicity and fund raising to advance our mission

We hope this summary of where we have been and where we want to go will be of use as the College of Arts and Sciences moves ahead in its own strategic planning.

Respectfully submitted, Michael Barnhart and Nancy Tomes
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