

**External Review Team Report  
Graduate Program in History, Western Carolina University  
March, 2006**

**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

Your external review team visited the WCU campus on February 16 and 17, 2006. During our time on campus, we visited with virtually all History faculty, a number of graduate students, and met with key administrators, including the Provost, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the Dean of Arts and Sciences. We left campus enormously impressed with the job the Department of History at WCU is doing training graduate students in an environment of relatively scarce resources and heavy undergraduate teaching and advising responsibilities. All faculty members seem deeply committed to teaching, advising and mentoring graduate students. Faculty members spend impressive amounts of time with graduate students, helping them improve their critical thinking and writing skills as well as discussing the substance of the historical literature. Good graduate teaching is labor-intensive and the WCU faculty are willing to commit the time required to do the job well. They are also committed collectively to maintaining a supportive and collegial atmosphere among faculty and graduate students. The graduate students we talked to were decidedly impressed with faculty efforts in this regard, and it is indeed an impressive aspect of the WCU program.

We were impressed as well with the high level of research and scholarship conducted by the History faculty given the teaching emphasis of the University. Many faculty members have published books, and virtually all junior faculty members are well on the way to publishing books. Additionally, a number of faculty are deeply involved in some form of community service or outreach, whether to the university, the community, or the region.

We were also struck by the high level of collegiality which flourishes in the department. The department demonstrated a supportive atmosphere in which faculty members sometimes disagreed, discussed their points of disagreement, and yet maintained collegiality once the discussion ended. The department deserves high marks for civility and professionalism.

Finally, although it was not our charge to evaluate the undergraduate program, we found it virtually impossible to evaluate the graduate program apart from looking at some aspects of the undergraduate program. The graduate and undergraduate programs overlap in a number of ways, including teaching loads, distribution of course offerings, and the work required of teaching assistants, just to mention a few. Thus we had to look carefully at a few selected components of the department's undergraduate program. In doing so, we came away tremendously impressed at the work ethic of department faculty, at their commitment to undergraduate teaching, at the generally high level of that teaching, at the range of courses they offered, at the faculty's commitment to advising, at the department's collective determination to make the undergraduate major a rich and

rewarding learning experience, and at its insistence on reaching students in survey courses, where the challenge is often greatest.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

When we composed this report, WCU was in the midst of reviewing and revising its program review standards. The newly proposed guidelines ask that reviewers assess both the undergraduate and graduate program in question, and they outline an updated set of six standards for evaluation. Since our review formally took place under the old guidelines, however, we decided to address the undergraduate component of the history program only as it relates to the graduate program, and to incorporate the new standards only as they seem relevant to the central issues facing the History Department. We believe this approach best serves the purpose of this report, to identify program strengths and weaknesses and to outline possible improvements.

## A FOCUS FOR THE GRADUATE PROGRAM

Perhaps the clearest need for improvement we saw at Western Carolina University, at least as far as the content of the graduate program is concerned, is for the department to define a focus that is unique to the graduate program at WCU. In the language of marketing, the WCU graduate program needs to define its niche. In the language of historians, it needs to develop an intellectual or scholarly focus that distinguishes the WCU Masters program from others, to wit, a focus on a subject area in which the WCU faculty and resources are generally well-positioned to develop, provided some augmentation is forthcoming from the University administration. The department currently has one focus, American history. That is an important, even a necessary, focus, given the program's location and its role as a feeder of PhD programs which themselves tend to emphasize American History. But this focus is hardly one that can set the Western Carolina graduate program apart from other similar MA programs.

Before turning our attention to ideas for such a focus, the external review team strongly recommends that the History Department abandon its current effort to develop a second focus in European history. The University library and Language departments lack the resources needed to make a European focus work at WCU. Faculty currently involved in the effort to develop a European track conceded that they did not have the support and cooperation needed from foreign languages to produce competitive European MAs. Plus, our review of library resources also suggested that the development of a European track is not appropriate for WCU. Moreover, even if every other obstacle could be overcome, we doubt that there is a critical mass of students interested in such a track among the pool of applicants from which WCU draws from most heavily. To be sure, WCU has a number of fine faculty members in the European and non-American area who must be involved and engaged in the training of graduate students. The external review panel has some specific suggestions about how this could be done which will be covered later in this document (see the section on 600 level classes). But developing a European History track is, in our opinion, NOT the right move for the department.

We feel that the department's defining focus for its graduate program should be something that more closely reflects the strengths of the faculty and available library resources (especially with regard to primary source material) and has meaning to the larger community and region. While a number of options come to mind, after serious reflection, the external review team believes that the best possible focus for the department is in the field of Southern Appalachian History, or perhaps the History of Appalachia in the American South (a longer phrase but one which perhaps more clearly states our meaning). This focus would allow the Department to highlight, develop, and draw into confluence at least three current or potential areas of strength: Southern history, Cherokee History and Public History. Each of these areas taken separately might struggle either to sustain or define an intellectual focus for the WCU graduate program, but taken together, as they could be under a Southern Appalachian History or HAAS track, the areas would develop a synergy that could define the WCU program in a manner that would be consistent with existing faculty strengths and library resources and meaningful to the community and region. We also believe that a focus on Southern Appalachian History or HAAS would appeal to a healthy plurality of the program's applicant pool. As far as we know, this focus is not duplicated elsewhere in the region and therefore presents a real opportunity for WCU to define itself in the academic marketplace.

The effort and resources needed to develop this focus would not be particularly great. It would require WCU to make very effort to retain Andrew Denson, a rising star in Cherokee History, and develop as much interaction as possible with Cherokee scholars in other disciplines. In terms of Southern and Appalachian history, the department would simply have to coordinate the efforts of its talented existing faculty in these areas. The same would also be true with faculty who work in Public History. The focus would be strengthened if the department could hire, using endowment funds or gifts to the University, an established Appalachian historian. It would also be wise to hire a faculty member who can assist in the teaching of Public History at the graduate level. (We recognize that there might not be a large demand at the undergraduate level.) This faculty member could have virtually any research specialty but the appropriate experience and expertise to teach public history to graduate students. The Department's focus on HAAS or Southern Appalachian History can be developed before these additional hires are made but these positions could become hiring priorities that would enhance the program's stature in the near future.

## GRADUATE STIPENDS

Given its very limited resources, the History Department has done a remarkable job training M.A. students and it has placed them in competitive Ph.D. programs such as the University of Mississippi, the University of Kansas, Louisiana State University, Auburn University, and the University of Georgia. Remarkably, over the past five years, six individuals, or roughly 10% of graduating M.A. students have been placed in the University of Georgia's well-respected Ph.D. program.

History faculty at Western Carolina are dedicated to graduate education, as the students readily attest. The Tuckaseigee Valley Historical Review, published by the graduate students themselves, reflects the strength of the scholarly community that the department has been able to create. This success is all the more noteworthy because admissions standards in the program remain relatively low. Even with these relatively low standards in place, it is currently difficult for the History Department to recruit more than ten students per year, largely because of very low graduate stipends. The department's rolling admissions process arguably serves it well but its admission standards do not. Yet admissions standards cannot be raised until the History Department is able to offer competitive graduate stipends.

Current graduate stipends are \$3,000 per semester or \$6000 per year. Tuition is \$1,672 in-state and \$6,464 out-of-state. Tuition plus room and board for on-campus students amounts to \$3,586 in-state and \$8,378 out-of-state. In short, current stipends do not even cover tuition plus the cost of living. To be competitive with comparable M.A. programs, stipends must be raised to \$10,000 per year. In addition, the Department should have the flexibility of offering some full and partial tuition waivers to its top applicants. By comparison, M.A. students at the University of Georgia receive full tuition waivers and stipends of \$9,740 per year. Ph.D. students receive an additional \$1,000. At the University of South Carolina, MA students also receive at least \$10,000 per year plus significant tuition reductions, and PhD students receive \$12,000 per year, also with significant tuition reductions. At both institutions, a few special fellowships are available to help recruit high-priority applicants.

Raising graduate stipends at WCU would have several benefits: (1) the program would be able to recruit better graduate students, which would make the department more appealing to younger faculty; (2) the department could increase the size of each entering class, permitting faculty to offer and fill more 600-level classes; and (3) faculty could use graduate students, who would now be adequately compensated, more efficiently as teaching assistants. We should note that graduate students expressed a keen interest in working as teaching assistants. This last point is especially important, for it will allow the History Department to adapt to meet the changing needs of a rapidly growing university, especially in the area of offering large classes with weekly break-out sessions led by graduate students.

## TEACHING LOAD

The majority of the History Department faculty would like to move to a 3/3 teaching load. We recommend this change, since it will facilitate faculty recruitment and retention, boost research productivity, enhance graduate teaching, and, indirectly, give graduate students opportunities to do more meaningful work as teaching assistants. We think it can be accomplished without changing the ratio of student credit hours to FTEs. Raising the graduate stipend will be critical to this process, for it will allow faculty to ask more of their teaching assistants.

In fall 2005 and spring 2006, the department offered a total of 29 surveys in European history and 39 in American history. These courses were each capped at 30 students. Therefore, approximately 1,170 students took some form of the U.S. survey in 39 different classes. If only four U.S. survey courses each year were expanded to 150 students each, the Department could teach 600 students in four courses instead of the current 20 courses. As in other universities, these courses would meet twice a week for lecture and a third time in a break-out section, led by a graduate teaching assistant. The teaching assistants would be responsible for all grading.

By offering four courses with 150 students each, the department would free up 16 courses otherwise dedicated to the survey. Eleven of these could be used to reduce the teaching load to 3/3. The other five could be used to offer more 600 level courses, something that both faculty and graduate students desire (see below). We believe that students majoring in American history can also serve competently as teaching assistants in entry-level European surveys, and we urge the Department to expand the size of a few European survey courses as well.

There are pedagogical arguments in favor of keeping survey courses small, of course, but we believe that the mission of the university and department is better served by expanding the size of entry-level service courses in order to strengthen the graduate program and boost faculty productivity. Expanding the size of these courses would also permit a greater flexibility in offering more upper-level undergraduate courses. Some of these might even be capped at fewer than thirty students.

Along with the move to a 3/3 load, we suggest that faculty be given the flexibility to bank one course per year. Course banking is especially important to junior faculty, who currently receive only one two-course reduction before going up for tenure. With course banking, faculty could teach an overload one year (3/4), and then use their banked course along with the two-course reduction to have a semester dedicated solely to research and administrative responsibilities.

#### GRADUATE CURRICULUM: 600 LEVEL CLASSES

We consistently heard from both WCU faculty and graduate students that the department needs to offer more 600 level classes (classes that are limited to graduate students only), and the external review panel heartily concurs in this sentiment. The need for more 600 level classes will be especially urgent if the department is able to expand graduate enrollment by offering higher stipends. We believe that if some of our other recommendations about survey class size are implemented, the department will be able to teach more 600 level classes without adversely affecting overall enrollment figures.

We also believe, based on the experience of other graduate programs, including the ones at the University of South Carolina and the University of Georgia, that the 600 level classes should be broadened to cover longer chronological sweeps of time, broader topics, and, in some cases, methodological approaches. In the American History track, for example, one 600 level course could cover America to 1789, another the United

States from 1789 to 1877, and a third the United States from 1877 to the present. Other courses could cover broad topics, American Social History, the Old South, and so on.

In addition to this chronological and topical broadening within tracks, we believe that Europeanists and other non-Americanists should be actively integrated into the graduate program by offering courses covering topics or comparative themes (i.e., Gender, Military History, Revolution, Religion, Economic Transformations). Each non-Americanist in the department could likely craft some course that fits his or her particular expertise and would yet have topical, thematic, or comparative value to graduate students.

Moreover, to facilitate the integration of all interested faculty into the training of graduate students, the review team believes that the graduate curriculum should be revised to encourage greater breadth. We believe that a distribution requirement should be implemented. For example, all graduate students might be required to take two non-American courses as part of their degree program. Our graduate programs each have requirements of this sort and they work well, giving our students broader perspectives and involving more faculty members in the training of graduate students. Such a requirement adds breadth to the student's graduate education in terms of substance, exposes them to a broad array of faculty expertise, and likely gives them a competitive edge in their application to Ph.D. programs.

#### HISTORY'S ROLE IN TEACHER EDUCATION: MAEd/MAT/NC TEACH

The History Department plays a critical role in the MAT/MAEd and NC Teach programs, admitting between 25 and 30 students into the department each year. The relationship between the College of Education and Allied Professions and the History Department is vital to the continued health of the history graduate program, since it provides an important source of student credit hours. However, we believe that as currently structured, the education of MAT/MAEd students places a heavy burden on the History Department. A single faculty member serves as the advisor for all MAT/MAEd students. This faculty member is responsible for the following tasks: 1) handling all enquiries from prospective applicants, 2) evaluating all applications, approximately 60 to 75 per year, 3) Advising all students, usually numbering 25 to 30, and 4) teaching HIST 633, a graduate course specifically designed for MAT/MAEd students.

These responsibilities are over and above those the faculty member's regular departmental responsibilities, which include advising fifty undergraduate students and sitting on regular departmental committees. Well over 50% of the MAT/MAEd advisor's time is spent in some aspect of administrative work. In return the faculty member receives a two-course reduction.

We believe that this arrangement uses faculty time unwisely. Given a little training and occasional supervision, an administrator who is able to fill out a program checklist and follow program guidelines could handle all of the responsibilities of the MAT/MAEd advisor, with the exception of teaching HIST 633. We therefore recommend

transferring these responsibilities to an administrator, thereby freeing up the two-course reduction currently given to the MAT/MAEd advisor. Given the critical role of the History Department in recruiting, advising, and teaching MAT/MAEd students, we hope that the higher administration or College of Education and Allied Professions can contribute to the cost of hiring this administrator.

## TENURE AND PROMOTION STANDARDS

We feel that the current T & P standards of the History Department are high, especially given the overall level of research support available at the institution and should not be changed. Currently WCU faculty are meeting standards that are essentially the same (with regard to scholarship) as those at major state research universities where teaching loads are lighter and more research support is available. This is an impressive accomplishment on the part the History faculty and should be recognized and rewarded. We would urge the WCU administration to make more resources available to help History faculty meet these high standards, whether in the form of travel money, release-time from courses, or use of research assistants.

## CONCLUSION

The quality of the History M.A. program is a credit to the University. Faculty, despite their heavy teaching loads, continue to publish and speak at professional conferences, and they are dedicated to graduate instruction. Their students fare exceedingly well in Ph.D. programs. As part of our conclusion, we would like to offer a few suggestions on how the department might better share its remarkable success and about how it can act now to ensure that such success continues.

We urge the department to raise its visibility on campus. Last year, one faculty member, Elizabeth McCrae, designed, raised money for, and led a Civil Rights tour through the South. This extraordinary effort brought together faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and undergraduates. The Department should develop other public projects as well. In a regular “works-in-progress” seminar, for example, faculty members might present their research to the university community. Graduate students could do the same. The History department needs to let the University, the larger community, and even the region know more about the fine work it is doing.

We also urge the Department to embrace change as the University plans for growth. It has been our experience, and the experience of other state institutions we know of, that as a state university grows, enrollments in History classes almost inevitably increase as well (albeit to varying degrees), both at the survey and upper undergraduate level. Whatever course of study entering students plan to pursue, they usually end up taking some History classes. So as WCU grows, it is likely that History enrollments will grow as well, and, for better or worse, growing enrollments appear to be the key to increased funding at public universities.

We note that some of the recommendations in this report, or at least comparable ones, were made in the 2000 report as well: sharpening the department's focus, offering more 600 level seminars, and reducing the teaching load. And yet a review done six years later shows little progress in these areas. Given the growth that appears inevitable at WCU, it would be a lost opportunity and a strategic error not to pursue these changes now. Such changes, if thoughtfully and expeditiously implemented by the department, can be harnessed for both the Department's and the University's benefit.

Yet, no matter the commitment of faculty members, the program will not be able to improve significantly without additional support from the administration. Most importantly, the administration must raise graduate stipends to \$10,000 per year. The administration should consider supporting the department in other ways as well. Travel funds would allow faculty to pursue their research and present their findings at professional conferences. And funding for an administrative assistant would ease the burden on the MAEd/MAT advisor. Moreover, the administration must help History find the larger classrooms it needs to teach larger numbers of students in the survey courses and assist in the solving of other logistical problems related to this important change. In partnership, we believe the faculty and administration can develop one of the leading history M.A. programs in the Southeast.

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