

To: Faculty, Department of History  
From: Timothy Snyder  
Regarding: Revised 2-4 Report, for discussion 30 January 2007  
Date: 23 January 2007

In response to the announcement of 13 April 2006, the director of graduate studies of the Department of History carried out in fall semester 2006 a review of the PhD program as seen and understood by its students and faculty. In addition to the student survey responses gathered by the graduate school, I collected impressions and recommendations from students and faculty. I solicited faculty responses by email, and received a few. I also spoke personally with six faculty colleagues in the department before the report was drafted. Having distributed this report in an earlier draft to graduate students and faculty colleagues on 4 December 2005, I spoke with another twelve in December and January.

By design most of my interaction during this process was with the graduate students. They are the people for whom the program is most significant, and whose experience of the program is most tangible. Insofar as the program will be reformed, it will be to the benefit of those who are currently in the program and those whom we wish to recruit in years to come. With this in mind, I gathered input from the graduate students in several ways.

I invited them to come speak to me in my office, which several of them did. I met with each cohort year collectively, which was extremely fruitful. I also asked one student, Adam Arenson, who has a Javits fellowship and who organizes a reading group, to pass on the responses of his peers. Two more students, Taylor Spence and David Huysens, agreed to serve as liaisons between the students and myself. They passed on a few comments from students who wished to remain anonymous, and also took the trouble to organize a student-faculty lunch. I was purposefully absent at that meeting; the two liaisons sent me written summaries of the remarks of everyone who attended (and attendance was very good). The recommendations that follow are consistent with everything I have heard from my own colleagues in the department, but are consciously grounded in what I have learned from the students.

At this point in time, this report represents my recommendations as director of graduate studies. It was submitted in an earlier draft to faculty and graduate students on 4 December 2006; this revision takes into account many of their suggestions. It is now a proposal to the department for changes to the program, to be discussed on 30 January 2007. It has been submitted to the graduate school and has Jon Butler's endorsement.

All of the conversations were quite pleasant and students had a number of very cheering things to say about the faculty and the program. Nevertheless, within the great variety of student responses five themes emerged which confirmed the premise of the project: that certain things can go wrong in years 2-4.

(1) *Transition from Year Two to Year Three.* A large number of students believed that Year Two was “more of the same,” a “repetition of the first year,” or “boring.” Year Two “slows you down” and is “poor preparation” for year three. The transition between year two and year three was the most-cited failure in the program. The summer between the two years was often seen, in retrospect, to have been poorly spent.

(2) *Incoherent Overloading of Year Three.* Year Three was almost uniformly characterized as too busy. Students reported that they were “surprised,” “overwhelmed,” or “disappointed” by year three. The typical combination of teaching, reading for orals, and writing of the prospectus and grant applications was seen, understandably in my view, as too much work, and as difficult to conceptualize as part of a coherent program of study leading towards a dissertation.

(3) *Obscurity of Orals and Prospectus.* Moreover, the processes of preparation for orals and the writing of the prospectus were regarded as unnecessarily obscure. Students often reported that they began work on their fields and their prospectus too late, and that they were unsure as to just what these projects entailed. Students reported that they often learned about the nature of orals and the prospectus from one another. Two students used the expression “folk knowledge” to characterize the way students came to understand what was expected of them in year three.

(4) *Insufficient Introductory Coursework.* Students working in fields beyond the United States expressed envy of History 700, the Americanists’ field seminar. They expressed the desire for a course in which issues of method could be approached by example, and which would allow them to meet their own peers and form more of a cohort.

(5) *Poor Relationships with Advisors.* Finally, several students found that their relationships with their advisors were inadequate. Without assigning fault in individual cases, one would be hard-pressed to avoid the conclusion that something systematic is wrong in this area.

The following recommendations are proposed because they fall within the brief of the 2-4 project, and because they are all reforms which, while addressing student concerns, are minor in their implications for faculty and require only modest changes in the program. The guiding principle adopted here is that relatively small changes in the outline of the program would be sufficient to make a major difference in students’ understanding of the program and use of their time. Students have now had a month to comment on these proposals; their reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. Everything proposed here is in the spirit of allowing graduate teaching in the department of history to be more successful in its own stated goals.

Recommendation One.           **A Mandatory Orals Field Tutorial in Year Two.**

**[approved, on the books 2007-2008, mandatory as of 2008-2009]**

This course would take the form of reading for an orals field with one of the three future orals committee members. It would be strongly recommended that this tutorial be taken in the first semester of the second year.

A mandatory orals field tutorial would have the following advantages:

- (1) It would require students and their advisors to begin a structured relationship in year two. If the desired advisor is on leave, the student can do a minor field tutorial with another faculty member. Either way, a structured relationship emerges. This has several positive implications. Students have information about faculty which can allow them to make better decisions about supervision; faculty also have information about students that allow them to identify problems. Faculty members could of course take several students at once, while developing fields and reading lists appropriate for individuals.
- (2) It would remove a great deal of the pressure from year three. If students have carried out the reading for one their three lists in year two, reading in year three is much reduced. Year three becomes much more manageable, and students should have a far easier time advancing to candidacy in good time.
- (3) It would allow advisors to tailor reading lists to individual students. Students must always do a good deal of preparatory reading for dissertations which, while falling within a major field, would not necessarily be included on a list. Aside from this long-term benefit, a tailored reading list is a form of the individual “feedback” – the lack of which is very often cited as a deficiency of the program.

Recommendation Two.           **A Mandatory Prospectus Tutorial in Year Two.**

**[approved, on the books 2007-2008, mandatory as of 2008-2009]**

The prospectus tutorial is already in the course catalogue. Its purpose is to familiarize the student with debates in the relevant field and to prepare the student for fieldwork. It should conclude with the submission of a draft prospectus. It would be strongly recommended that this mandatory course be taken during the second semester of the second year. The completed draft prospectus would be submitted by every second-year student to the director of graduate studies. This submission, like passing the tutorial, would be a precondition to enrollment in the third year. Such a tutorial could be taught in a one-to-one format, or in groups – although in the latter case the dissertation advisor would naturally play a role.

Making the prospectus tutorial obligatory would have the following advantages:

- (1) Like the mandatory orals field tutorial, it would require a structured relationship between students and faculty. If a desired faculty member is on leave, the student would have the options of taking this colloquium with that faculty member, or of doing this colloquium with someone else, likely another member of the committee. The student and the principle advisor would have to agree between themselves which of the two options the student would choose. Faculty members could of course take several students at once, developing several prospectuses at the same time.
- (2) Students would begin to think earlier about dissertation topics. In the natural course of events the choice of topic is an evolutionary process. The earlier it begins, the sooner a student will reach its conclusion. Knowing that a prospectus tutorial is required by the fourth semester will encourage students to make preliminary decisions about topics no later than the third semester.
- (3) Students will be more likely to receive outside funding. If students wish to travel during year four, they must submit applications for fellowships as early as fall semester in year three. The prospectus is, among other things, a template for a funding proposal. A draft prospectus completed in the spring will leave students well prepared to complete funding applications in the fall.
- (4) It would make the summer between years two and three purposeful. With a draft prospectus in hand, students would know what kinds of reading they should be doing to finalize the prospectus and to prepare for the dissertation.
- (5) It would ease the transition between years two and three and open up possibilities for fruitful research in year three. With a draft prospectus in hand, students should have no problem scheduling their prospectus colloquium in year three, and should have an easier time negotiating other obligations. Moreover, with a topic more or less decided, students should be able to feel that they are progressing towards the degree in year three, rather than just trying to keep up with obligations and deadlines.
- (6) The prospectus tutorial counts as a research course. Students are required to take three of these, a requirement which often creates an accounting problem for them and for the department. This would reduce that problem considerably.

Recommendation Three.      **A Yearly Seminar Entitled “Methods by Example.”**

**[On the books as of spring 2008 as Hist 500 “Classics and Methods”]**

This course would borrow from the format of History 700, "Introduction to the Historiography of the United States." It would be convened by a faculty member, but its major subject matter would be the published works of colleagues in the department. Before broaching these books as introductions to method, the course would begin with sessions on basic subjects such as: library research, note-taking, and prospectus-writing. In contradistinction to History 700, it would include all fields outside the United States. It would not be an obligatory course. It would serve three purposes:

- (1) Such a course would address the criticism that the department offers too little coursework in methods, a criticism the Americanists meet with History 700. In the absence of a devoted methodology course, individual sessions with the possibility of asking about individual ways of working would be of great value.
- (2) It would create the opportunity for students to get to know members of the department outside their immediate field of interest, and require them to read widely in areas that they might otherwise have ignored.
- (3) Such a course would keep (many of) the members of an incoming class in touch with one another, creating the sense of cohort that Americanists seem to have.

Recommendation Four.        **A Handbook for Students.**

The present director of graduate studies, in consultation with his predecessors, should assemble a guide for students. This would not include ephemeral information such as deadlines, but rather provide advice about issues that students of every class will confront: coursework, orals, the prospectus, research, and writing.