

## UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

### History

*Catharine Beyer and Esteban Maldonado, Office of Educational Assessment*

*Matt Erickson and Jon Olivero, Academic Advisers, History*

*January 2016*

### INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines<sup>1</sup>, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.<sup>2</sup> Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

### METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those experiences<sup>3</sup>; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.<sup>4</sup> Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 33 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Beyer, et al., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students, about 17% of the total 2012-13 graduating class. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method<sup>5</sup>, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

## **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

## **HISTORY DEPARTMENT RESULTS**

The History Department was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments. Matt Erickson and Jon Olivero, then academic advisers in the department, asked 28 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all of them agreed. The 28 students who were interviewed represented about 16% of the 180 seniors in History who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (<https://uwprofiles.uw.edu/Viz/View/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes>)

## ***Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge***

Most of the interviewees (50%) had two quarters to complete before graduating, and 43% were in their final quarter at the UW at the time of the interviews. Two students (7%) had three quarters left before graduating.

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, six (21%) of the 28 interviewees mentioned more than one course. Overall, the interviewees listed the following 14 classes in the major as presenting them with significant challenges, about equally divided between courses at the 300- and 400-levels:

HSTAM 340, Medieval Women  
HSTAA 353, Class, Labor, and American Capitalism  
HSTAM 365, Medieval England (Urbanski)  
HSTAA 371, Consumption and Consumerism in the Modern US  
HSTEU 376, Modern Irish History (Behlmer)  
HSTRY 388, Junior Seminar (10, with three students mentioning Urbanski and one student mentioning each of the following: de Lilva, Camp, and Warren)  
  
HSTAS 402, History of Medieval and Mughal India (Dhavan)  
HSTAS 423, History of Modern Japan  
HSTAA 432, History of Washington and the Pacific Northwest (2 with one mentioning Findlay)  
HSTLAC 488, History of Central America and the Caribbean  
HSTRY 494, Historiography (2, with one mentioning Medieval Inquisitions)  
HSTRY 498, Senior Seminar (11, with one student mentioning each of the following: Taylor, Wright, Urbanski, Shattuck, Ravael, Felak, and Jung)  
  
History of Europe from WWII to the present  
History of Film

In addition, one student listed Philosophy courses taught by Peters and Hildebrand.

The majority of students identified their Junior (36%) and/or senior (39%) seminars as the sites of their most challenging work.

### ***1. Students' Greatest Challenges***

Students were asked: "What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major." Four (14%) interviewees provided more than one response to this question. Two strong themes emerged from students' responses.

**A course.** Fourteen (50%) of the interviewees said that a course had presented them with their most challenging work in the major. Of that group of 14, about half specifically referenced the Senior Seminar course and five identified the Junior Seminar as their most challenging course. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *Senior Seminar. Because I thought about it the most, it challenged me the most. It was the last class I took. I worked on it the most.*

- *Junior Seminar. It made me work on paper and think it out ahead of time—something you haven't done throughout school.*
- *Senior Seminar. It was a free-range of topics, so it was hard to figure out what I wanted to research. It was hard to know what he [the professor] wanted.*
- *Senior Seminar, simply because I researched, analyzed, and created a history about a monument around Seattle. The research was all on my own. I had to find materials, and it also taught me to analyze sources and the ability to gather data and then to complete a narrative about it.*
- *The last winter quarter, I took the History of Europe through Film course. I didn't think about how big an impact on WWII film had. I realized that the legacies of history inform our world today.*

As these quotations suggest, even when students identified a whole course as presenting them with their greatest challenge, they frequently also pointed to some aspect of the writing required in those courses. This was particularly true for students identifying the Junior or Senior Seminars.

**Writing in the major.** Eleven (39%) of the interviewees said that a research paper, or more generally, writing in the major, presented them with their most significant challenges. In their own words,

- *I guess what stretched my thinking the most was doing research papers, especially the one I'm doing now on the colonization of Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Thinking what has not been done in relation to what has been done [is challenging]. Also questions of historiography [are challenging], such as is history meant for the community or just for academia.*
- *My final research paper for my Senior Seminar was the greatest challenge. It was the longest paper I have ever written, requiring the most in-depth research where I had to think about my original ideas and take a new approach to a topic in history.*
- *The research papers because they involve getting intimate information on the subject. That makes you [feel like] an expert on the subject and makes you get a deeper understanding of a topic. It's more in-depth than just reading a text*
- *The hardest work that I've done was the essays in the Junior and Senior Seminars because required a culmination of the skills that I learned as a major and putting them in the form of a well-argued paper.*
- *Probably any of the research papers I have done, especially ones where the professor let us choose the topic [were the most challenging work I did]. When you could choose topic you wanted, that made me spend more time on it.*

In addition, seven students gave the following individual responses:

- Balancing the work of two classes at the same time
- Independent study
- Projects
- Discussions
- Engaging with others

- Access and use of archive system
- Nothing yet (only one quarter in the major at UW)

## 2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

When asked what had made those activities challenging, 17 (61%) of the 28 students gave more than one response. Because so many students spoke of challenges specifically related to writing, we divided responses into two categories—writing challenges and other challenges in the major—and then analyzed students’ comments within those categories. About 19 (68%) of the History interviewees spoke only of writing challenges; seven (25%) spoke of other challenges; and two interviewees mentioned both writing and other challenges.

### Writing Challenges

Four strong themes and several minor themes emerged from students’ explanations about what made writing in the discipline challenging for them.

**Conducting the research required to do the writing.** About 57% of the students noted that the challenges in their writing were research-related. Students spoke of challenges they had grappled with in using both primary and secondary sources. About half of this group spoke of the challenges in finding and using other scholars’ work to develop their own arguments. For example:

- *Entering into debates with other scholars, you need to know what you’re talking about.*
- *The ability to handle sources fairly while also forming a persuasive argument. It’s easy to form a persuasive argument and not handle sources fairly.*
- *Learning how to develop your own ideas by pulling from ideas and thoughts articulated by those before you.*

Several other students spoke of the challenge of learning to do the research and becoming an expert on a topic. In the words of three of them:

- *Learning to do the research itself, using microfilm, newspapers, special collections—looking for best sources.*
- *Writing comprehensive research papers. How in-depth we had to go. How many sources we had to use. For Senior Seminar having so many secondary and primary resources to work with.*
- *The amount of research involved and the independent aspects of researching your own topic [were the greatest challenges].*

Finally, a few students who spoke of the challenges related to the research required for their writing noted the challenge in evaluating sources, as this student pointed out:

*Understanding the biases of sources [was challenging]. The sources come from colonizers and Catholic minister, so they are written from the perspective of a foreign culture and wanting to change culture, not understand it.*

**Independently coming up with their own historical arguments.** More than a third (36%) of the interviewees spoke of the challenge of having to figure out their own historical arguments or topics for

writing assignments. About a third of that group noted the challenge in letting the sources direct and shape the arguments they ended up making (“Sources directed the argument, not vice versa.”). The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *[It was challenging because they were] open ended papers. You were free to do what you wanted to do.*
- *What makes it so challenging is there’s no defined actions. There are multiple ways of approaching it. You are entering into debates with other scholars, so you need to know what you’re talking about.*
- *The fact that nothing was provided for me. Finding my own sources. The solo aspect and the absence of material. Producing something out of nothing.*
- *My final research paper for my Senior Seminar. It was the longest paper I have ever written and required the most in depth research, where I had to think about my original ideas and take a new approach to a topic in history.*

**The amount of time and/or work required to complete the writing.** Twenty-five percent of the interviewees said that their greatest challenge in the major was the amount of time and work that it took to complete their writing assignments. As three of them noted:

- *Time. We have other classes that are going [and] papers in our other classes. Time is very limited.*
- *The length of the paper and the greatest amount of writing I have ever done.*
- *[I spent] lots of time in the library, online, reading parts of books, juggling this with three other classes. I wanted to focus on the one thing!*

**Thinking/learning in new ways.** Fourteen percent of the interviewees said that thinking and learning in new ways presented them with challenges, including one student who spoke of challenges in thinking about how to use historiography, quoted below as one of the two examples of this category of response:

- *I guess what stretched my thinking the most was doing research paper--thinking about what has not been done in relation to what has been done. Also questions of historiography: Is history meant for the community or just for academia.*
- *It’s not hard science. It’s a different way of learning.*

**Other—writing.** One or two students gave the following responses in speaking of the challenges that writing in history presented:

- The level of reading required to do the writing (2)
- Planning the paper ahead of time; doing it in stages
- Understanding and using multiple perspectives in writing
- *It was my last class. I wanted my writing to reflect what I learned in the major. I didn't want it to be a first-year paper."*

### **Other Challenges in the Major**

In terms of challenges unrelated to writing, only two minor themes emerged from students' responses.

**Speaking in class/giving presentations.** Three students (11%) said that discussion-based classes or giving presentations presented them with their greatest challenges. As two of them said:

- *I freaked out talking in front of people and you had to give presentations. Interacting with the professor so closely, discussions, and presentations [were challenging].*
- *Engaging groups and group discussions. Connecting with other opinions and gaining the trust of different viewpoints. The different input made me reconsider my own ideas, consider opinions outside my own. Putting my opinion out there, standing before the class and presenting [were challenging].*

**Gathering research independently to help my understanding.** Two students spoke of the challenge of doing research on their own in order to better understand course content. As one of them put it:

*Definitely the seminar I'm taking right now. It's not in my field so I have to do a lot of outside research. There are a lot of readings even though we only meet once a week.*

**Other—non-writing.** In addition, individuals gave the following responses when asked what made the experience they described challenging:

- Understanding how the past shapes the present (e.g., how WW II shapes current thinking)
- Understanding a time that is not my own (e.g., the medieval period)
- Lack of any knowledge of events during specific time in history (e.g., the Cuban missile crisis)
- Time commitment in taking more than one history class per quarter
- Considering opinions other than my own
- "What challenged me most was not in this major."
- "Nothing yet—it's only my first quarter here."

### **3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?**

About 61% of the interviewees identified more than one source of help for meeting the challenges they described. For example, this student speaks of help received from her own efforts, the professor, and peers—combining the three most frequently given responses to this question in one answer:

*Going to class and doing the work. The most important thing is engaging in discussion with classmates and professors. If I weren't in discussion, I would not think about it as much. It is in discussion where I have to solidify my opinions and express what I think.*

Regarding what enabled them to meet their challenges, students' responses yielded three strong themes, along with several minor themes.

**My own efforts.** Thirty-nine percent of the History interviewees said that their own efforts had helped them meet the challenges they had described. In speaking about their efforts, students spoke of a wide range of efforts, such as doing the work required in class; keeping up with the reading; connecting earlier readings to current readings; reading extra materials or researching topics on their own; and better notetaking as a way to formulate discussion questions ahead of time. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *Time management. Taking advantage of campus resources.*
- *Reading extra materials helps, on outside background and people. Reading from different sources helps and from different people.*
- *I started to get most of the reading done at least enough to get the gist. Learned better note taking to formulate discussion questions ahead of time.*
- *Thorough knowledge of material and doing some outside research as well.*
- *Self motivation. Going to the archives.*

**Reading differently.** More than a third (36%) of the students spoke of learning to read in new ways as helping them meet the challenges they described, suggesting that learning to read historical texts is an explicit part of the curriculum for History majors. For example, half of the students who noted that their own efforts had helped them—the category that precedes this one—also identified ways of reading that they had used. The frequency with which students mentioned reading made us decide to identify it as a theme in its own right, even though it always emerged with others. Some examples of this category of response:

- *Learning to read huge volumes of material, to read strategically.*
- *Focus on comprehensive reading of the sources. Taking notes as I went. Finding passages in the book that were helpful for my arguments.*
- *I guess what was reinforced for me in this aspect is the fact that all people's ideas need to be taken seriously. That forces you to read them fairly and also to construct [your own arguments] for what they had to say.*
- *Critical reading comprehension skills—really scrutinizing the text. Putting yourself into that time period to get a better understanding of it.*

**Peers, including peer review and discussion.** About 21% of the interviewees mentioned the help they had received from peers and class discussion. As three of them noted:

- *The discussions in the small classes were a big part of it. It's harder in the larger lecture format to get that.*
- *The feedback from students allowed me to do more things with my paper. Peer review and small size.*
- *Talking with friends and other students working on the paper about how they met the challenges.*

**Professors and TAs.** Eighteen percent of the History majors interviewed spoke of help they received from their professors and TAs. As two of them said:

- *Talking with TAs. Using all the resources at hand to do the best I can do. Taking constructive criticism to heart.*
- *Meeting frequently with instructor to check on methodology [helped me].*

**Other.** In addition to these responses, three or two students mentioned the following:

- Learning or knowing how to evaluate documents, especially primary documents (3)

- Working on a topic of interest to me (2)
- Small class size (2)
- Using sources, including from other disciplines, to write history papers (2)
- Learned to use library resources/help from librarians (2)

Finally, individual students gave the following responses:

- Learning that all people's ideas need to be taken seriously
- Learning to sleep less
- Writing the paper in stages
- Learning what history is and is not
- Nothing yet; this is my first quarter here

#### **4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?**

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described. One student did not respond to this question. From the responses of the remaining 27, one very strong theme and several minor themes emerged from students' responses.

**Strengthened my academic skills.** Two thirds (66%) of the interviewees responding to this question spoke of improving or adding to their academic skills by completing their most challenging work in the major. These students sometimes spoke about improving skills in general, but more often, they mentioned improvement in specific areas, and usually, they identified more than one of these areas. The skills most frequently noted and the number of students who identified each follow:

- *I became a better writer in the discipline* (10—or 37% of the 27 students who responded to the question)
- *I learned to be a better researcher* (9, 33% of all interviewees)
- *I became a better, more analytical, or critical thinker* (7, 26% of all interviewees)
- *I improved my skill in reading and evaluating sources* (3, 11% of all interviewees)

In the words of eight of these students:

- *I think it strengthened the research, writing, analytical skills. Formulating arguments*
- *Research and analysis. Research needs to be comprehensive; [you need to] find multiple sources. You need to find people that represent multiple points. I learned to comprehend more and analyze documents.*
- *I learned to write a research paper. I perfected my writing. I improved my ability to analyze and write down my own thoughts.*
- *[I learned about] structuring papers, what components go into writing a good history paper, how to present evidence, and make a good argument.*
- *I learned how to look at primary and secondary sources, to look at historical bias in them and evaluate that. It also reinforced what I learned about citing sources—footnotes, MLA, parenthetical.*

- *[I learned] how to think critically and how to manage time properly. Overall how to write a better paper.*
- *[I learned to] decide which sources were the best to use.*
- *Analytical reasoning and argument construction.*

**Other.** In addition to this dominant theme, three or two students mentioned that they had learned the following:

- A better sense of what I'm studying/what history is (3)
- Time management and how to plan (3)
- Greater confidence and satisfaction in my own abilities (3)
- To challenge myself (2)

Also, individual students said that they had learned the following:

- That this is fun
- Information about a historical time or place
- The amount of work that goes into a research project

## SUMMARY

Writing in the discipline and completing the research required for that writing dominated History majors' discussions of their most challenging work in the major. When asked what their most significant challenges were, History majors described courses—most frequently the Junior and Senior Seminars—and the writing they experienced in those courses. In fact, when asked about the specific challenges in their academic experiences in the major, more than two thirds of the students (68%) pointed to challenges they had experienced in their written assignments, as the student's responses in the box that follows this summary illustrate.

The writing related challenges that the History interviewees noted most frequently were conducting the research required to do the writing (noted by more than half of the interviewees), coming up with their own topics and arguments, the amount of time and work such papers take, and learning how to think in new ways. In terms of non-writing challenges, students spoke of participating in discussions and giving presentations and the challenge of doing research independently to become better informed about a topic.

When speaking of what helped them meet those challenges, most students pointed to their own efforts, with more than a third noting that learning to read more critically and carefully had helped them with their writing and research work. Students also mentioned the help they received from peers, professors, and TAs.

When asked what they had learned by meeting the challenges they described, students overwhelmingly mentioned the skills they had improved in the process of taking on those challenges. Thirty-six percent said they had become better writers; close to a third said that they had become better researchers; and one in four said that they had become better thinkers.

Although these interviews on challenge in the major were not designed to assess whether students were meeting the department's learning goals, the responses of the History majors clearly show that

students feel they are developing their “skills in critical reading, critical thinking, critical writing, and historical research”—a learning goal listed in the History Department’s 2015-17 Biennial Assessment Report. Furthermore, results from this study show that the Junior and Senior Seminars play a critical role in students’ development of these skills, but that these skills are also emphasized in the other History courses students take. Interestingly, students’ responses show the important relationship between critical reading and capable writing in the discipline and—perhaps more significantly—students’ awareness of that relationship.

Finally, students’ responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggest that History majors felt that the challenges they described were rewarding, as this student’s comment illustrates:

*The biggest thing I learned was that doing this is actually really fun. It can help you grow intellectually but also as a person. It’s not just an ivory tower experiment.*

This positive response to challenge is consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than they do when coursework is easy.

#### ***One Student’s Responses to All Four Questions***

**Course(s) where greatest challenges occurred:** History 388, History 498. Professor Shattuck. Professor Urbanski

**Q1. What was the most challenging work you did?** *The research papers because it involves getting intimate information on the subject, makes you an expert on the subject and makes you get a deeper understanding of a topic. Makes it more in depth than just reading a text.*

**Q2. Why was it challenging?** *Probably wrapping your head around the topic, honing in on the argument, being really specific in trying to bring up things that people might not have thought about on the subject.*

**Q3. What helped you meet that challenge?** *Critical reading comprehension skills—really scrutinizing the text. Putting yourself into that time period to get a better understanding of it.*

**Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge?** *Challenging yourself. Not settling for a basic assignment, but taking extra steps to become an "expert" on the subject, from checking out different sources to wrapping it all into one concise clear argument.*

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