

Rethinking a Curricular “Muddle in the Middle”: Revising the Undergraduate History Major at Western Michigan University

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When the Department of History at Western Michigan University (WMU), along with eight other institutions, participated in the Association of American Colleges/American Historical Association (AAC/AHA) initiative entitled Liberal Learning and the History Major in the early 1990s, the department was poised for change.¹ WMU was the largest institution in the AAC/AHA project, and its curricular issues were varied and complex. The numbers of students in the department's three undergraduate programs—secondary education, public history, and liberal education—had been steadily increasing for several years, and in 1992 the department added a Ph.D. program to its well-established M.A. graduate offerings. New faculty, in turn, enhanced the department's capacity to diversify course offerings into areas such as material culture studies, Native American history, and African American history. New and existing faculty alike were eager to create a curricular framework that included new historical perspectives and sources.

As faculty grappled with the AAC mandate to create a coherent connection among introductory-, intermediate-, and advanced-level history courses in the undergraduate curriculum, the department focused on three strategies. We began with an intellectual framework for the revisions, using a set of courses corresponding to introductory, intermediate, and advanced skill levels. Those courses included the introductory-level *Historians in the Modern World* (designated History 1900), which was a new three-credit gateway course (replacing a one-credit version of the class) designed to introduce history as a discipline, cultivate appropriate research and writing skills, and offer an overview of professional options for historians. The *Study of History* (History 3900) was revised to complement *Historians in the Modern World* by focusing on historiography and by further honing research and writing skills at the intermediate level. Options for capstone

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¹ Association of American Colleges and American Historical Association, “Liberal Learning and the History Major,” 1991, *American Historical Association*, <http://www.historians.org/PUBS/Free/LiberalLearning.htm>. Linda J. Borish, “Re-Forming the History Major at Western Michigan University,” *History Teacher*, 28 (Nov. 1994), 72–78.

experiences included a teaching methods course for students in the secondary education curriculum; a senior seminar or senior thesis for liberal education students; and a required internship for public history majors.² In addition to those foundation courses designed to frame the student's academic progress, an array of new classes ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to Women in European History encouraged students to develop diverse historical perspectives. Finally, to help students construct a coherent academic program, the department instituted an advising system in which undergraduate history majors and minors were assigned faculty mentors. Together, professor and student were expected to select appropriate curricular choices and, ideally, discuss professional options, internships, research opportunities, and other matters that would enhance student engagement with the department, faculty colleagues, and the discipline of history.

Although the history faculty enthusiastically endorsed and implemented the thoughtful revisions of the early 1990s, the need to scrutinize and adjust the department's curriculum persisted. By the early 2000s, growth in the numbers of history majors and minors; concerns about student skill levels and content knowledge; assessment expectations at the university and state levels; and the faculty's experience with implementing the reforms all pointed to ongoing curricular challenges.

Those challenges were first experienced by history faculty in the classroom. Between 1993 and 2003, the increase in both undergraduate and graduate enrollment at WMU continued, and that increase was reflected in the history department, whose numbers peaked in 2004 with 822 undergraduate majors and minors and 58 graduate students. As in the 1990s, the Department of History offered majors in secondary education, public history, and liberal education, each with distinct requirements. The 2005 enrollments in the three tracks reflected a common pattern: the majority of undergraduate history majors selected secondary education (350) with far fewer students choosing public history (39) or liberal education (125). Since 2005, overall enrollment figures have declined slightly, but the proportion of students in the three tracks has remained fairly consistent. We also found that increasing numbers of students were entering the history program at WMU as transfers from one of the state's many community colleges or, less frequently, from another four-year institution. Like students who began their academic work at WMU, the transfer students' content and critical skill preparation varied greatly, as did the range of history courses they wanted to apply to their WMU degree programs.³

While the department delighted in the blossoming of historical interest and welcomed students as well as the growing class enrollments, the increased number of history students posed serious challenges for faculty. Enrollments jumped in both the wide-ranging history general education courses and in advanced-level and capstone courses designed for majors and minors, but the number of tenure-track and tenured faculty increased only slightly, from 28 in 2003 to 31 in 2005. The departmental commitment to offer more graduate courses also limited faculty availability to teach undergraduate classes. To fill

² In 2006 Western Michigan University (WMU) adopted a four-digit course numbering system. For consistency, we are using that system, rather than the three-digit system in place during the Association of American Colleges/American Historical Association (AAC/AHA) project.

³ Founded in 1903, WMU is a public coeducational institution located in Kalamazoo. It is a Carnegie Foundation "Research University with high research activity" and Michigan's fourth-largest institution of higher education, offering 140 undergraduate and nearly 100 graduate programs. The school's current total student population is nearly 25,000, of which approximately 90% are from Michigan, 4% are international students, and 11% are Americans from minority groups. *Western Michigan University*, <http://www.wmich.edu>. Thanks to the Department of History chair, Marion (Buddy) Gray, for making available the statistics on history student numbers.

this gap, doctoral students more frequently taught survey and general education courses (capped at smaller numbers), while faculty struggled to staff the major's gateway courses (History 1900 and 3900) and advanced-level content-based courses. The predominance of secondary education students also placed significant pressure on that track's capstone course, History Teaching Methods for Secondary Schools, while reducing demand for the senior seminar capstone in the liberal education curriculum.

With the curricular reforms of the early 1990s, history faculty assumed the task of mentoring and advising history majors and minors. Overall responsibility for the undergraduate curriculum rested with one faculty member, who was appointed director of undergraduate studies for a renewable one-year term. Growing student numbers, an increase in transfer and nontraditional students, a complex curriculum, and a cumbersome student information and advising system in WMU's colleges burdened faculty advisors with unprecedented and increasingly taxing levels of responsibility. Many students, perhaps sensing the discomfort of their advisors, or lacking interest in meeting with an advisor, simply failed to seek academic advice in their major and minor fields, and as a result they had little connection to the culture of the history department.

As the student population grew, we began to notice an increasing disparity between well-prepared students and those who lacked critical reading and writing skills, particularly in advanced (4000-level) courses. Initially, faculty perception of students' difficulties with the skills required in the history curriculum was based on anecdotal evidence. However, in 2004 the department introduced an outcomes-based assessment plan that documented long-observed skill deficiencies. The plan measured four curricular objectives generated by faculty: the ability to critically read and analyze primary and secondary sources; proficiency in communicating ideas and interpretations in written, oral, or visual forms; progressive development of historiographic and content knowledge; and an awareness of demands and expectations put on those engaged in the history profession. Several of those objectives were measured through an assessment of a "professional proficiency essay," one of the components called for by the plan. Modeled on job or graduate school interviews, the essay required students to answer questions based on a primary document they received in the interview setting. Students were to identify important historical themes illustrated in the source, contextualize the material, and indicate how they would communicate this information to a specified audience. Each semester, teams of faculty evaluated the essays and after several semesters concluded that even though the essay exercise was administered in the capstone experience, many advanced students lacked the ability to perform these fundamental historical tasks at an acceptable level.

Faculty also expressed concern about student content mastery. The problem especially troubled those of us teaching advanced-level thematic courses. In such advanced courses as the French Revolution, West African History, Traditional China, American Sport History, the Reformation, and Ancient Rome, instructors presumed that the students would possess some basic content knowledge that would prepare them for intensive study. Instead they encountered students who lacked even introductory course work and historical knowledge in the appropriate area. For some students, especially those who were not history majors, the advanced-level class was their first university-level history course.

A second assessment tool corroborated the faculty's subjective analysis of students' content knowledge. The state of Michigan required students in the secondary education curriculum to pass the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) to receive certification

in their major and minor fields. Administered since 1992, the MTTC used objective questions to evaluate content knowledge in four areas: world history, U.S. history, “connections among social science disciplines,” and “social science perspectives and skills.”⁴ While the scores of WMU history majors and minors were sometimes above the state average and sometimes below it, we noted with concern that our students seemed to struggle with the world history component of the exam. The problem was particularly pronounced for history minors, presumably a result of the less stringent course requirements of a minor field. Since the MTTC reflected the Michigan Department of Education’s content standards for secondary education, this deficiency in content knowledge suggested that some of our history graduates might be ineffective as middle or high school teachers.

As we considered how best to respond to those external demands on history students, we also experienced some unforeseen consequences of the curriculum revisions of the early 1990s. The department had envisioned that students would take History 1900, now entitled *An Introduction to the Study of History*, at the beginning of their academic work in history, and History 3900, *Advanced Historical Skills*, an intermediate-level course, midway through their program. Both courses emphasized historical skills and methods and were implemented to prepare majors for advanced-level courses. However, because the university’s student information system was unable to enforce course prerequisites and students only sporadically sought faculty advising, few students followed the intended course sequence. Convenience was often the most important motivator in students’ curricular choices; as they selected courses that “fit their schedule,” many found themselves in upper-level classes without adequate content knowledge or skill preparation. As a result of this muddle in the middle of our program requirements, faculty often needed to adjust course expectations in their advanced-level and capstone courses. Those who taught History 1900 and 3900, in turn, frequently faced recalcitrant students who had already completed advanced-level classes. Those students felt unduly burdened when they were required to work on writing and analytical skills in lower-level classes.

The intermediate-level history courses remained a muddle in which substantial gaps in student abilities and knowledge were not being adequately addressed. Curricular revisions of the 1990s emphasized the advanced-level courses (which accounted for eighteen out of the thirty-six credit hours required for the major). In addition, requirements in the three tracks demanded that students have courses representing varying combinations of geographic, cultural, and chronological diversity. By their nature, however, advanced-level courses were quite specific. While students might gain valuable in-depth knowledge through a course entitled *United States History, 1920 to 1940*, there was no curricular guarantee or requirement that they actually acquire broad, inclusive coverage of U.S. history. The problem became even more apparent when students selected specialized advanced courses in European or non-Western history, but then lacked the knowledge or sophistication to place what they learned in those courses in the broader context of world history. Our students ended up with a smorgasbord education: they often had deep knowledge on specific topics, but little capacity to synthesize and contextualize those pieces of knowledge. The structure of the curriculum proved particularly problematic for transfer students, especially those who had taken several introductory-level history courses at community colleges. Even with adequate advising we had little choice but to

⁴ “Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC), Test Objectives, Field 009: History,” 2005, *Michigan Test for Teacher Certification*, http://www.mttc.nesinc.com/pdfs/mi_fd009_obj.pdf.

place those students in advanced-level history classes whether or not they had the required skills.

Finally, history faculty noticed that as they strengthened their efforts to talk with students about how they might use their degrees and encouraged students to consider the varied career opportunities for history majors, the different requirements of the three history tracks sometimes impeded students who decided to move in a new direction. For example, students who switched from secondary education to the liberal education curriculum needed twelve credit hours of premodern history that had not been a part of the secondary education requirements. While not creating insurmountable obstacles, variations such as these often added considerable coursework for students who decided that high school teaching or museum work was no longer their career of choice.

Those experiences, coupled with increasing concerns about our students' preparation, persuaded the history faculty to resume a dialogue about how best to address the department's relationship with its undergraduate students. Two issues soon emerged from that conversation: not only did the department need to consider traditional academic issues such as curriculum structure and content, but it also had an obligation to examine the broader cultural and professional challenges faced by undergraduate history students. The department, in other words, needed to develop a culture that encouraged student success and engagement with the discipline of history in new and innovative ways.

The department already had structures and practices in place to address curricular challenges. Each year, history faculty met for a late summer retreat to discuss substantive departmental issues. Beginning in 2002, the retreat focused on undergraduate curriculum issues ranging from revisions in the department's baccalaureate writing course (History 3900) to consideration of world history survey courses and their relationship to traditional Western civilization offerings.⁵ The Undergraduate Studies Committee, a standing committee of six to eight faculty members, also began to discuss components of a revised curriculum. The department's Assessment Committee initiated the production of a yearly report to faculty on measures of undergraduate student performance, adding both quantitative and qualitative information to our subjective appraisal of curricular needs. The department began frequently to devote part of its biweekly faculty meetings to recommendations for curricular change from the two committees.

Several themes and protocols emerged from these often protracted discussions, which helped direct further consideration of curricular change. Perhaps most importantly, in 2004 the faculty adopted a set of guidelines for content and skill development entitled "Recommended Guidelines for Content, Skills, and Work in Undergraduate History Courses."⁶ Designed to provide a touchstone on which to build a clear and coherent curriculum, the guidelines represented faculty consensus on amounts of reading; types of evaluation; breadth and depth of content knowledge; and research and writing skills

⁵ As a part of its general education requirements, WMU requires all students to have a baccalaureate-level writing course, which is usually taken within their major department. These courses are intended to develop discipline-specific writing skills particular to the student's major program and must include substantive writing assignments and the opportunity to rewrite under faculty supervision. These courses are in addition to the general writing proficiency and basic English composition requirements. WMU has no Western civilization requirement, but the general education requirements include course work in fine arts; humanities; health; social, applied, and natural sciences; U.S. cultures; and "other cultures." "General Education," 2008, *Western Michigan University: Academic Catalogs*, <http://catalog.wmich.edu/content.php?catoid=9&navoid=232>.

⁶ For the guidelines, see "Department of History: Curricular/Major Change for Fall 2008," *Western Michigan University*, <http://www.wmich.edu/history/undergraduate/Curricular%20Major%20Change%2008.html>.

appropriate to introductory, intermediate, and advanced course levels. At each level, we considered four characteristics of the courses: general traits such as class size and extent of prior knowledge assumed; content and skills presented or developed in the course; types of instructional materials; and modalities of evaluation. For example, we defined introductory-level courses as broad chronological surveys with 60–120 students in which the instructor assumed no previous knowledge on the part of the students, and in which content was developed around key themes, events, individuals, historical terminology, and periodization. These courses also introduced the concept of historical interpretation as well as research and library skills. Faculty agreed that textbooks and supplements were appropriate in these courses; that scholarly articles, monographs, or works of fiction might be used in moderation; and that primary sources should be included. Evaluation might be based partly on “objective” examinations and quizzes, but exams should include a writing component. Faculty suggested that additional short writing assignments should be required but that major research projects were not appropriate at this level.

The guidelines similarly helped clarify and define intermediate- and advanced-level courses. At WMU, many intermediate-level courses are similar to surveys in that they carry no prerequisites and fulfill university-wide general education requirements, thereby attracting many nonmajors. Generally, these courses cover a more narrowly focused geographical area and/or chronological span than introductory courses, and they incorporate content and skills somewhat more sophisticated than those presented at the introductory level. We agreed that these courses also should require more—and/or more challenging—writing assignments, rely mainly on blue-book exams, and offer a deeper discussion of historical methods and historiography. Textbooks might still be appropriate for some courses, but instructors were encouraged to make greater use of monographs, scholarly articles, and primary sources. The narrowing of acceptable content and the deepening of writing and research expectations continued for advanced courses, enabling instructors to delve more deeply into constructing and critiquing historical interpretation and argument.

The guidelines clarified the structure of course offerings for students, especially those just entering the program, and they served an important internal function as well.⁷ Increasing numbers of undergraduate students and stable or declining numbers of faculty lines necessitated that the department rely on doctoral students and term-appointed faculty to teach some of our courses. The guidelines offered an effective way to introduce those colleagues, as well as new tenure-track hires, to departmental conventions and expectations. It is important to note here that the faculty, while agreeing to a prescriptive structure of course-level expectations, remained committed to academic freedom. We expect colleagues to be good departmental citizens with the common interest of serving our students, but we do not enforce strict adherence to the guidelines or censure those who go their own way.

While content and skill guidelines documented an idealized orderly progression for students’ intellectual growth, existing courses did not necessarily fit the model. In 2004, faculty turned their attention to revising and developing courses with an eye to maximizing skill building and content acquisition across the curriculum. To address the concern

⁷ Many students still matriculating under the “old” system are only vaguely aware of the curricular changes, but incoming students are familiarized with the new structure through the History Advising Office. In addition, advisors direct students to the section of the departmental Web page devoted to explaining the new curriculum, including the full text of the guidelines. *Ibid.*

that the existing curriculum centered skill acquisition in just two classes (History 1900 and 3900), we began by reconceptualizing those courses and eventually merged them into a single new course, Introduction to the Study of History (History 2900). History 2900 retained the format and much of the content of History 1900 but added an abbreviated discussion of historiography and historical methodologies. Writing and research skills previously honed in History 3900 would be reinforced and developed in a new category of content-specific courses at the intermediate level. Designated “writing intensive,” these new courses allowed faculty to teach small sections (courses are capped at thirty students) in their areas of specialization, while building on the historical research, methodological, and writing skills introduced in History 2900. Advanced courses mandated additional writing challenges designed to meet the university’s baccalaureate writing requirement while allowing students to select and focus in on specific topical areas.

In developing new courses and course categories, we also sought to enhance students’ acquisition of content and focused again on courses in the middle. Writing-intensive courses at the 3000 level presented an opportunity for intermediate-level class offerings that combined some of the broad sweep of surveys with the more narrowly defined content of advanced-level courses. That conceptualization made necessary an adjustment of traditional periodizations. Colleagues met in three subcommittees comprised of North Americanists, Europeanists, and non-Westernists (which included Latin Americanists) to hammer out a workable menu of new courses that often coalesced content from existing advanced-level courses. In North American history, for example, faculty replaced two advanced courses, Antebellum America and Civil War and Reconstruction, with an intermediate-level writing-intensive course entitled United States, 1820–1898. In the new curriculum, advanced-level courses, all now defined as baccalaureate writing courses, used thematic titles as umbrellas for offering more specific content or methodology. For example, opportunities to teach specialized courses on the American Civil War or gender in antebellum America remained at the advanced level under thematic rubrics such as “War and Society” and “Topics in Nineteenth Century America.” Other new courses might be developed within the framework of thematic courses, such as “Race and Ethnicity,” “Gender, Sexualities, and History,” or “Environment and History.” Within that framework, faculty can develop innovative courses for students presumably well prepared in the content area.

To incorporate these new courses into major and minor programs that reflected our broader curricular goals, in 2006 the Undergraduate Studies Committee proposed revisions to all three major tracks that integrated progressive skill development and broadened and systematized the acquisition of content. A sequence of courses aimed at skill development provided the framework. History majors would now begin their skill-building sequence with History 2900, then complete at least two intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, and finally enroll in two advanced-level baccalaureate writing courses. History 2900 functioned as prerequisite for 3000-level writing-intensive courses, and students needed at least one writing-intensive course before enrolling in an advanced-level history course.⁸ The implementation of a new university-wide electronic course catalog and student registration system that effectively described the new courses and, most importantly, enforced prerequisites ensured that we could mandate the progressive development of

⁸ Students—especially nonmajors who would not normally take History 2900—may enroll in writing-intensive and advanced-level courses with the permission of the instructor.

skills for our undergraduate students. While students are not formally required to take any of the introductory survey courses before taking History 2900 or a writing-intensive course, faculty advisors steer students toward the surveys or the intermediate general education courses before encouraging them to take on a more challenging writing-intensive course. Through advising we are also able to discourage students from taking advanced courses until they have accumulated sufficient background at the introductory and intermediate levels. Since students have many courses to choose from to fulfill requirements at the introductory and intermediate levels, they do not face bottlenecks in the system. We anticipate that the new interconnections between courses across the curriculum will alleviate the “muddle in the middle.”

With that sequence of required, skill-based courses at the introductory and intermediate levels in place, faculty set out to ensure that all majors had a broad foundation of content knowledge in U.S., European, and non-Western history early in their programs. All three major tracks now require at least twelve credit hours at the introductory (1000/2000) level, including History 2900, and one course from each of the three survey sequences (United States, Western civilization, and world). At the intermediate level, both the larger general education courses and the new writing-intensive courses help eradicate the “muddle in the middle” and ensure that students develop a balanced range of skills and content knowledge before enrolling in advanced-level courses. The new major requirements for all three tracks call for fifteen credit hours at the intermediate level, six of which must be in writing-intensive courses. Each track has slightly different, but clearly specified, requirements regarding the geographical range of courses. Six credit hours at the advanced level should also reflect broad geographic diversity: students select one U.S. baccalaureate writing course and a second in either European or non-Western history. The capstone course for students in the secondary education curriculum remains History Teaching Methods for Secondary Schools, while students in the liberal education curriculum can choose, depending on their professional goals, to complete a senior thesis, participate in a 5000-level seminar, or enroll in a third baccalaureate writing course in an area of specialization. Public history majors arrange and complete a six-credit internship in a public history institution as their capstone experience.

This new curricular structure has several important advantages. After students meet the requirements that give them breadth of coverage in North American, European, and non-Western history, they have flexibility, in all three tracks, to pursue an area of particular interest or simply avoid scheduling conflicts. The broadening of course requirements at the introductory and intermediate levels also resolves the muddle of course selection for our many transfer students, enabling them to select appropriate courses to build skills and content knowledge without the pressure of moving immediately into advanced-level university courses. For traditional students beginning their course work at WMU, time spent in introductory survey courses or broadly based intermediate-level courses not only enhances their content knowledge, but also offers students the opportunity to mature in their academic pursuits before tackling progressively more challenging classes. Finally, the parallel structures and requirements across the three history tracks permit students to defer deciding on their professional track until they have gained substantial experience in the discipline, and they offer students the opportunity to change their minds and move in new directions without significant penalty.

Although these curricular revisions engendered lengthy and often contentious debate, the issues fell within a traditional faculty mandate. Conversely, evaluating student interaction with the department and changing student culture pushed into unfamiliar territory, and colleagues struggled with how best to address the problems. Initially, we focused on the growing numbers of students and the need for competent, consistent advising. In 2003, we agreed that the problem warranted a faculty line and voted to establish a permanent director of undergraduate studies (DUS) position. Because the position required an atypical balance between teaching, service, and research, we decided to take advantage of a new WMU job category termed "faculty specialist." At WMU, this designation is used in a number of ways, but it often refers to a primarily teaching or administrative position with no research requirements. Wishing to maintain the department's research-oriented identity, we specified that the DUS required a Ph.D. in history and an active research agenda, but emphasized the service, teaching, and administrative components of the job. The department filled the DUS position with a tenure-track faculty specialist in fall 2003.

This position strengthened the department's undergraduate program in several ways. First, the DUS teaches only one course per semester and devotes most of her attention to student advising and to organizing and administering undergraduate major and minor programs. This involves working with other departments' directors of undergraduate studies, the Arts and Sciences College Curriculum Committee, the college advising office, the registrar's office, and the university Committee on General Education. Maintaining continuity in this position has resulted in far more effectiveness than the previous system, in which a new person learned the ropes every few years.

In addition to creating the dedicated DUS position, the department established a centralized undergraduate Advising Office to replace the dispersed mentoring system established in the 1990s. The DUS oversees a standing Advising Committee of three or four faculty members who are responsible for holding regularly scheduled advising hours in the Advising Office. In that way, a few colleagues commit to a formal committee responsibility to be informed about departmental and university requirements and to advise students about their course selection and other curricular issues in a consistent manner. Mentoring about career paths, graduate school applications, internships, or the development of a senior thesis topic might also take place in the Advising Office. Frequently, advisors direct students to faculty who share their disciplinary or professional interests for additional conversations.

Centralizing student files is another important component of the new advising structure. Under the previous system, individual advisors maintained student files, but varied greatly in their dedication to the task. The new, efficient filing system allows easy access to student records, consistent charting of student progress through the major and minor requirements, and a method for documenting advice given and individual student concerns. All faculty advisors have access to the files, so while students might meet with different advisors, they have confidence that all information is documented and a part of their departmental records. Whereas students who began their studies under the old system used the Advising Office inconsistently, incoming students are required to visit the office to establish an advising file near the start of their programs. A departmental culture now exists in which regular visits to the Advising Office have become the norm.

In addition to committing substantial resources to the DUS and Advising Office, the department also sought innovative ways to enhance interaction with its undergraduate

majors and minors. In an effort to expand students' professional awareness and encourage them to take advantage of university and departmental opportunities early in their academic careers, the department initiated a new program series as a part of the required History 2900, Introduction to the Study of History. Termed "Friday forums," these weekly sessions explore such university-based programs as study abroad, career placement, undergraduate research fellowships, and Honors College programs. Students visit the library, learn about the university archives and regional history collection, and investigate film and the World Wide Web as resources for historians. In the professional segment of forums, public historians from the region, local high school history teachers, librarians, lawyers, and others who have used a history degree to forge a career talk with students about their experiences. Students may attend a lecture from a visiting scholar as one of their forum choices. Although the forum segment is capped at ninety, students are encouraged to consider it a professional seminar and are invited to interact with the speakers. After each forum, students turn in a form evaluating the content in light of their own goals and objectives. Their responses, the lively discussion that often occurs during forum presentations, and follow-up conversations through history advising suggest that forums enhance undergraduates' academic opportunity and professional awareness.

To further encourage the engagement of undergraduates, the department established the History Undergraduate Fellows program in 2006. Funded by donations from retired departmental faculty, the program invites undergraduate majors and minors to apply for funding to visit libraries and archives, attend scholarly meetings, participate in volunteer or internship experiences in schools or public history institutions, travel to historic sites, or otherwise explore opportunities to expand their interest in history and advance their professional goals as historians. Grants range from \$50 to \$500, and applications are evaluated on the merits of the proposal rather than the academic standing of the applicant (we require a minimum grade point average of 2.50). Students go through a formal grant application process, produce a budget for their project, and seek letters of support from faculty. To date, the department has funded more than fifteen grant proposals ranging from \$500 to help support an internship at a London museum to \$50 to attend a regional conference for history educators. Others students have used fellowships to attend a conference on medieval history, support research for senior thesis projects, and assist a faculty member in preparing and conducting an advanced-level undergraduate course. In the last example, the student had previously excelled in the course and was paid a stipend for what amounted to an apprenticeship or practicum experience—gathering primary sources, scanning materials, screening documentary films, and incorporating these sources into the class materials presented by the professor. That student also served as a resource for students by sharing insights on writing essays, conducting library research, using electronic databases for historical newspapers, and engaging in other related activities. As a part of the grant, students are required to submit an essay documenting the experience and are encouraged to talk with other students about their fellowship at the department's annual "history happening."

Like the Fellows program, the "history happening" encourages interest in history and seeks to develop a positive relationship between students and the department. Held each spring, the "happening" is a departmental open house that features pizza and pop, book prizes (donated by faculty), and various stations (located in seminar rooms, offices, and hallways throughout the department) with information on major and career-path op-

tions, the Fellows and honors programs, and Phi Alpha Theta history honor society activities. Students and departmental alumni staff the information stations and talk with other students about their internship experiences, study abroad adventures, or history-related activities. The purpose of the open house is two-fold. Undergraduates learn about their peers' experiences, and student presenters have a vested interest in promoting a positive departmental culture. Faculty members, in turn, volunteer to set up poster sessions or material culture displays relating to their research projects so that students can ask questions, see what their professors do outside the classroom, and generally get to know faculty members in a no-pressure environment. Each year brings greater student attendance, and we hope that the third happening, in spring 2009, will generate even greater interaction among students and between students and faculty in the thriving WMU history community.

The implementation of those programs reflects the history department's hope and expectation that student engagement will lead to academic achievement. Programs such as the History Undergraduate Fellows are aimed at honoring students at any stage during their academic careers, but we also thought it important to retain more traditional end-of-career honors. After struggling for years to organize an often erratically attended awards program honoring academic achievement, we decided instead to establish a formalized "honors in history" transcript designation. Because the program requires that students actively apply and because a transcript designation follows the student into post-baccalaureate study, we reasoned that it was a more effective way to document and honor achievement. Winners of other academic honors such as the department's Presidential Scholar Award and an undergraduate writing award receive written commendation and are introduced at the annual history happening. Our chapter of Phi Alpha Theta has continued to hold its own initiation ceremony, as does the university chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. The names of all students receiving academic honors are prominently displayed on an undergraduate honors board near the History Advising Office. We also have been expanding our efforts to stay connected with our graduates through an annual history department newsletter that is sent to six thousand alumni and emeriti, and by inviting distinguished alumni to return to campus to visit and talk with current students.

Some of these curricular and cultural revisions have been implemented gradually over the past several years, but the entire structure of curricular changes was not fully in place until fall 2008. Cultural and curricular change of this magnitude has required us to reassess how the department uses its limited resources. Delegating resources to designate a permanent director of undergraduate studies was critical to completing the actual process of curricular change at the university and state levels, as that colleague could devote the time and attention needed to shepherd these complicated revisions through both the university and state curriculum review processes. The department's centralized advising system eased transition for students and developed appropriate patterns for helping students complete their degrees under the old system, transition to the new curriculum, or begin their majors and minors under the new requirements. Both the Department of History Advising Office and the director of undergraduate studies also functioned as conduits for many of the broader cultural changes, including the Undergraduate History Fellows program or the annual history happening.

Even more critical to the success of this transition was the commitment and cooperation of the entire faculty. While faculty approved each step in curricular change, the new

system disrupted “business as usual” for many of us. As a guiding force behind the curriculum changes, the department’s Undergraduate Studies Committee asked colleagues to revise courses to fit the new curricular pattern; to emphasize agreed-upon skill levels and appropriate assignments as they conducted their classes; and, in many instances, to teach courses at varying levels. The curriculum review process challenged all of us to view the department’s overall course offerings from the perspective of student need and to seek a balance between content coverage and our own intellectual interests. Faculty members have varied in their ability to do this easily, and for many the process is ongoing. We envision continued scrutiny of course offerings as we work to balance student needs with faculty interests, and we understand that the success of this progressive approach to skill development and content expertise depends on the willingness of colleagues to actively support this common agenda.

Throughout this journey in rethinking and revising our history curriculum, we have strived to enhance the learning process for our undergraduate majors and minors, while also nurturing their appreciation for the discipline of history as a personal avocation and a professional pursuit. Our fundamental goal has been to create and maintain a coherent undergraduate curriculum in which students proceed through sequential course categories structured to foster their steady growth as historical thinkers, developing content knowledge and critical skills necessary for careers as teachers or public historians or for graduate study. We also hoped that a well-conceived, developmental curriculum, along with an enhanced advising system, would simplify students’ scheduling concerns and increase student retention. More ambitiously, and perhaps idealistically, we hoped to reimagine our departmental culture in a way that affirms our collective identity as a community of scholars on complementary paths of learning and sharing knowledge.

We have seen positive results in all those areas, but recognize that our work has barely begun. Our new gateway course, History 2900, is currently being taught for the first time. Instructors in our newly created intermediate writing-intensive courses are learning on the fly how to strike the proper balance between presenting historical content and developing students’ research and writing skills. Only time will tell how faculty colleagues will adjust to teaching new courses and adapting to new expectations. We are already talking about convening workshops or round table discussions among instructors of these courses, so that they can share ideas about what works and what does not as we continue to refine our guidelines for the new courses.

We are cautiously confident that the early indications of programmatic success will prove lasting. For several years we grappled with the intricacies of state and university requirements; the constraints of scheduling and prerequisites; shifting student numbers and staffing issues; and the varied priorities and concerns of faculty colleagues. At times our undergraduate program seemed like a house of cards in which the shifting of one piece would wreak havoc and cause the whole structure to collapse. Yet the house remains standing, thanks in part to our recognition that the muddle in the middle of our curricular edifice was weakening the entire structure. Even as we continue to work out the creaks and groans that came with our rethinking and reforming the history major, the Western Michigan University Department of History feels like a better place than ever to teach and to learn.