

University of New Mexico

Department of History

Academic Program Review

Review Panel Report

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January 13, 2020

1A. INTRODUCTION

The Visiting Committee, consisting of Kris Lane (Tulane University), Philippa Levine (University of Texas at Austin), Anita Obermeier (University of New Mexico) and Andrés Reséndez (University of California Davis) visited the UNM campus on November 11-12, 2019, having read and discussed among ourselves the department's self-study. In the course of our visit, we met with senior College administrators as well as the Provost and his core staff. We had meetings with the Graduate Director/GEC/GAC as well as with graduate students (MA and PhD) from the department. We visited the offices of the Center for the Southwest and of the *New Mexico Historical Review*, met with a representative of the department's Mellon/Career Diversity initiative and with members of the Undergraduate Advisory and Planning Committees. In rank-specific meetings, we met the majority of the faculty at the time of our visit.

1B. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Strengths

- A dedicated, energetic faculty, willing to serve both within and beyond the department
- A productive faculty, with several internationally recognized scholars
- A collegial faculty, even amid some policy disagreements
- An impressive cohort of diverse MA and PhD students
- A most impressive administrative/staff team

Areas Requiring Improvement

- Undergraduate enrollments; new strategies are being implemented
- Mid-level faculty promotion; incentives are coming onto the table
- Graduate stipends: low and unclear. Research/writing fellowships needed to render UNM competitive with its R1 peers
- Staff support; growing needs with rise of *NMHR* and CSW workloads
- Department website could better advertise the department's considerable strengths
- Multiple and overlapping committees; consider streamlining

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING CURRICULUM

Strengths

The department has devoted much time and effort to making the History major and minor both attractive and rigorous. We also see the UNM History Department working to re-insert itself in creative ways into the college and university core curricula, stressing the essential value of historical knowledge as well as the value of historical thinking and historical methods. A more obvious defense of required history courses at UNM is the rich and controversial history of the state of New Mexico, which offers history lessons for the whole country.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Despite these efforts, the department has faced the sagging enrollment trend felt across the U.S. In short, History has for the last few years been a hard sell, and there are several reasons for this. The discipline is not tied to a specific career (vs., say, computer science or physical therapy), yet it requires more reading and writing than nearly any other undergraduate field. This scares many students away. History also has a steep learning curve in terms of mastering and organizing large amounts of information and evaluating contrary evidence. Such tasks are not to everyone's taste. It may be true that as law school enrollments recover, so shall history enrollments (and majors), but national studies suggest this is not a fix.

One strategy to lift enrollments is to offer innovative topics courses that meet general education requirements. UNM students in other departments may feel that they have had their fill of US history courses and others in high school, but students majoring in the sciences—for instance—are still receptive to history courses related to the sciences, environment, food, natural and built landscapes, medicine, etc., and these are areas in which the UNM History faculty has considerable strengths. A related strategy consists of team teaching. Thematic courses that cut across climes and times often require the expertise of more than one faculty. A system that allows two instructors to receive full and proper credit for one course, setting enrollment minimums after allowing for a period of experimentation and ramp-up, may be attractive to some faculty members. As far as boosting history majors, one idea is to offer an introductory history research seminar open to students just starting their undergraduate studies, so they get a better sense of what doing “real history” is like (see below). Some surveys suggest that potential history majors get discouraged along the way, as they have to take traditional history courses before they are allowed to conduct original, primary-source research much later in their undergraduate studies. Finally, students just entering UNM are not familiar with the faculty members and possibilities available in the History Department. Some programs offer a one-credit course that meets once a week featuring a faculty member or advanced PhD student that allows beginning students to familiarize themselves with what the History Department has to offer. The English Department has such a one-credit 8-week course and could share its syllabus and supporting materials.

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Strengths

The History Department has shown itself exemplary in assessment across undergraduate and graduate degrees. As demonstrated in the self-study, their teaching and learning assessment is extraordinarily thorough, multi-faceted, and well-documented across time, providing any outsider a clear view of the department's aims and achievements as well as its remaining goals. This honest and thorough approach to the department's main service to the College, University, and State of New Mexico made our job as outside reviewers considerably easier than it might otherwise have been.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Undergraduate

Geographical coverage was not the first concern of the evaluation team, but we did notice some important lacunae (e.g., Africa, Asia, Middle East), fully explained in the self-study. Undergraduate interest in regional history often follows current politics, but there are deeper pedagogical concerns that have clearly vexed the UNM History Department. One way to address this problem of untaught parts of the world may be to ask faculty to retool some standard entry-level courses in thematic ways that might cut across world regions. Team members were surprised to see continued devotion to the History of Western Civilization survey course. Certainly, this old ‘war horse’ is taught well at UNM, and the course can be an effective entrée to the discipline. Yet nationwide enrollment patterns suggest that ‘Western Civ’ is increasingly seen as a hardship course, both to take and to teach. It may be time to consider reconfiguring or slicing up the material in ways that better excite student interest while still providing the same essential knowledge and tools for analysis.

The self-study mentions the recent effort devoted to rethinking the MA curriculum and notes the need to evaluate the doctoral program (discussed below). Given the undergraduate enrollment problem, the department might extend those considerations to the undergraduate curriculum to ensure that it continues to offer a rigorous but nonetheless attractive set of options to History majors and minors.

Graduate

The evaluation team saw that the History Department remains committed to world-class graduate instruction at both the MA and PhD levels. This is essential for a flagship university and should not be sacrificed under any circumstances. The MA program is unusually robust, but the review team wondered if some adjustments or clarifications may be required as the 4+1 or ‘internal’ History MA comes online. We heard little about it since it is brand-new, but based on our observations at other universities, students on these two MA tracks typically have different goals and needs, yet both take many of the same advanced courses. Explaining the difference between these two tracks to students can itself be a challenge. This is not an ‘area requiring improvement’ as much as a general observation. The two tracks may in fact mesh smoothly.

The PhD program is first-rate, with geographical and thematic concentrations that make sense given the university’s location and its faculty. That said, the program’s structure and strengths are not as clearly advertised on the website as they might be. Taking the view of a prospective PhD student, the evaluation team felt that the posted information on path-to-degree might be clearer. The current website link to the ‘Program for the Doctorate in History’ is dated with a clever but enigmatic ‘007,’ which ought to be reconsidered. (We realize that the 2007 ‘upgrade’ is the reference, not James Bond, but this is not encouraging to students applying to the program in 2020. It’s confusing at first glance and it gives the impression that the information contained is significantly outdated.) The link ‘PhD Qualifying Exam Guidelines and Flow Chart’ is also a bit daunting, and part of the flow chart seems to appear on an extra page as a fragment. A better solution might be to create a UNM History Graduate Handbook that is updated at least every

other year, consolidating all the necessary information from application to graduation – including the MA tracks as well, of course. Also, it is certainly up to the department to choose evaluation mechanisms for the highest degree granted, but it may be worth discussing the option of a portfolio defense (vs. comprehensive or qualifying exams) as a way to streamline preparation for the dissertation. This is not a recommendation, just something to consider given what other programs are turning to nationwide.

4. STUDENTS

Strengths

Undergraduate

The department offers a wide range of courses but is currently under-enrolled, a result of both national trends that have seen history enrollments dive and a local dip in state-wide higher education numbers. A newly-created Undergraduate Advisory Committee in the department plans to address both the enrollment slump and the impact of the state's new core curriculum requirements. The implementation recently proposed by the Department of a lower-division Topics in History option in the new Core Curriculum would both attract students more interested in themes than regions and allow faculty to develop more challenging and interesting lower-division courses.

Graduate

The team was pleasantly surprised to see a vibrant, funded History MA program, as this is increasingly rare in US universities. Those students we met were largely enthusiastic about the program and the faculty. We also noticed that graduate students at all levels have ample opportunities to teach or at least to assist in teaching, all of which is essential to the department's mission. Inevitably, as is the case at all institutions, students expressed some frustration about course availability. Faculty research leaves and the need to cover core courses make this an almost impossible problem to solve and we saw no evidence that the problem is any more pressing at UNM than at peer institutions. One workaround might be to allow advanced undergraduates to join low-enrollment graduate courses so that they may 'make.'

Students voiced a hope that the department might explore the possibility of awarding a doctorate in public history. The demographic of the graduate student body plus the strong outward-facing roles the department has nurtured make this a feasible option intellectually, though in the current fiscal climate – and with little growth in faculty numbers likely – it might tax an already over-burdened faculty. We would recommend exercising caution in thus expanding the graduate program given current budgets and numbers.

The opportunities offered by the *New Mexico Historical Review* in particular, are excellent recruitment tools for the graduate program. The training that students attached to the journal receive is an invaluable career tool and doubtless improves the quality of their own dissertations as well.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Undergraduate

We recommend the department consider implementing a historical methods course (distinct from the advanced level Historiography and Advanced Research Methods courses already on the books) that students could take early in their careers as history majors as a way of engaging them with the kind of work historians undertake. Courses that require students to undertake hands-on historical work of their own rather than merely exposing them to historiographical debates are often more attractive at the undergraduate level. As we have mentioned elsewhere, the department may wish to consider whether maintaining existing survey requirements (and especially those in Western Civilization) may be adding to enrollment problems. The team wished we could have met with some undergraduate students, as we did with graduate students.

Graduate

The team was concerned that PhD funding is not clear to prospective students browsing the website. We also noticed that with the exception of the competitive Mellon and Bilinski Educational Foundation Humanities Fellowships for dissertation completion, there seem to be few sources of funding for this important stage of the doctorate. This can only hinder progress toward completion. Not all graduate students receive funding when they enter the program, and although they can subsequently apply for funding, that system does create a divide between the haves and the have-nots, and could lead to resentment that is divisive to each cohort.

The recently completed five-year Mellon/AHA initiative in which the department participated is now at a crossroads. With no more external funding, the department faces difficult decisions in sustaining or discarding practices implemented through the scheme. This would be an opportune moment for the leaders of the initiative to bring on board more faculty in any practices deriving from the initiative they seek to maintain. Indeed, it strikes us as imperative that the floor be opened for full discussion of this matter, as failure to do so has the potential to confuse the department's mission in granting the PhD. The matter could be folded into discussion of a new graduate handbook (or simply updating the PhD information on the website). In any case, the aims of the UNM History PhD will be talked about by graduate students as well as faculty, and some semblance of consensus would reassure at least the former.

5. and 6. FACULTY, RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP & SERVICE

Strengths

We found the department to have a high level of scholarly productivity as well as a palpable devotion to teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. There is a great deal of collegiality in the department as well as a willingness to serve on department, college, and university-wide committees; the history department is well represented in activities and policy bodies across the campus. The department is recognized as an active fund-raising department within the institution. Alongside their scholarly productivity and high levels of campus service,

the History faculty serve the local community, the historical profession (through Board memberships, H-Net leadership, grant panels, etc.), and a diverse array of learned societies.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Some mid-level faculty would do well to seek the rank of full professor. This is a plus on several levels. First, it lifts individual morale and pay (if only marginally). Second, it strengthens the overall profile of the department, especially in areas where graduate study is emphasized. Third, it strengthens the department's position within the university. For these reasons, the review team felt that the department, college, and university should all work to incentivize promotion beyond the associate level.

7. PEER COMPARISONS

Strengths

UNM History does more with less, but this is not a winning motto. It certainly makes keeping up with peers difficult if not impossible. The peer institutions (Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada-Las Vegas, Texas-El Paso, and Utah) make sense as mostly Western flagship universities with a few high-enrollment, urban regional universities added (UNLV, UTEP), but all of them had higher overall enrollments than UNM. As noted in the self-study, each of these universities has a well ranked and productive history department, and considering overall size the UNM History Dept. produces an above-average number of majors. As for graduate study, UNM outranks its peers in several metrics, and the placement record for graduates of the department's advanced degree programs is excellent. The department's NRC ranking is topped only by Arizona. Given the salary differential, in which UNM faculty lag significantly behind these peers, this may be difficult to maintain.

8. RESOURCES AND PLANNING

Strengths

The UNM History faculty are great planners, but the imagination can only go so far without resources and more generous internal funding. Both the Center for the Southwest and the *New Mexico Historical Review (NMHR)* are significant assets housed within the department.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Salary compression is a sore point for some faculty, and it appears that in at least a few cases this could be rectified without extraordinary expense. Recent strategies to improve full professor pay over that of other ranks may have inadvertently exacerbated the problem for other tenured faculty. An additional 0.5 staff position, a replacement for a position recently lost, would greatly aid both the work of the *NMHR* and of the staff who now cover the work previously allotted to that position. Both the Center for the Southwest and the *New Mexico Historical Review* do important and nationally-recognized work on minimal budgets, and both have energetic and

talented associate professors at the helm, a situation which might affect the promotion chances of those involved.

9. FACILITIES

Strengths

The History Department occupies one of UNM's architectural gems in Mesa Vista Hall (MVH), but the interior state of the building is borderline deplorable. While the interior boasts some mid-century charms and the staff like their open work area in the hub of the department, MVH mostly feels like a 1950s mental hospital with 1970s upgrades.

Areas Requiring Improvement

Our team was advised of basic necessities such as safe electrical outlets and functional plumbing. Power outages are apparently commonplace in the building and are disrupting activities significantly. Thus, an audit should be done on the electrical systems and wiring in the building, as this is also a safety concern. After these concerns come non-functioning blinds, which make some classroom activities impossible, except perhaps late at night. Ceiling mounted AV equipment in seminar rooms would be a great complement to the functioning blinds, should they be installed. Both the Center for the Southwest and the *New Mexico Historical Review* could use upgraded furniture in their spaces. Dilapidated furnishings damage an entity's brand and in turn UNM's brand.

10. CONCLUSION

Areas Requiring Improvement

The review team was immediately struck by the department's operating budget, which is unusually small relative to the size of the faculty. We hope this can be addressed, and soon. On a different plane, we were struck by the proliferation of committees within the Department, which may not be the best use of faculty time and effort. The Department may thus wish to consider streamlining its administrative structures to free up faculty time for research and publication; while the democratization that the current structure represents is admirable, it places undue burdens across the board, but has an undue impact, in particular, on associate professors who form the bulk of the department's membership. In addition to leading to multiple meetings, having too many committees needlessly splits or doubles up information. For instance, as the department seeks to attract promising PhD students by offering multi-year funding packages involving TAships, etc., it seems that a committee for graduate admissions and another committee for overall graduate student affairs would needlessly fragment information needed by both committees. While the workload of only one committee would be greater, faculty members could take turns serving in it and working more efficiently and better informed.

Overall, the review team was greatly impressed by the tenacity and determination of the UNM History Department faculty to maintain a top-flight program in the face of great adversity.