Graduate Program in History

Academic Program Review

External Team Report

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I. Introduction

The external Academic Program Review (APR) team for the Graduate Program in History met from November 28 through November 30, 2012 on the campus of James Madison University. Prior to arriving on campus, the team thoroughly reviewed the Internal Self-Study Report (ISSR) along with other documentation for the Graduate History Program. During their visit, the external team met with the Provost & Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Jerry Benson, the Vice Provost for Academic Programs Dr. Theresa Gonzalez, the Dean for College of Arts and Letters Dr. David Jeffrey, the Dean of the Graduate School Dr. Reid Linn, the Associate Director for the Center for Assessment and Research Studies Dr. Keston Fulcher, the History Department Head Dr. Michael Galgano, the outgoing Graduate Director for History Dr. Steven Reich, the newly appointed Graduate Director for History Dr. Philip Dillard, Graduate Faculty and Graduate Students. At the end of the visit on November 28, the team made a presentation of its findings and offered suggestions for moving the Graduate Program in History to the next level of excellence.

This report is divided into three main sections: Program Strengths, Program Challenges, and External Review Team Recommendations.

II. Program Strengths

- Full-time or part-time option makes the program accessible to broad participant base.
- Relatively small size of program (i.e., 35 students), affords students the opportunity to work closely with Program faculty.
- Three concentrations (1. United States; 2. Local, Regional and Public (LRP); and 3. World History) makes program attractive for students with variety of career paths and backgrounds.
- HIST 673, taught by Dr. Lanier, is a research and writing intensive seminar that is held in particularly high regard by students.
- Student engagement is strong as evidenced by participation on panels for new student orientation, participation in Center for Faculty Innovation Graduate Student Colloquium or the Graduate Research Fellows Program.
- Assessment program is relatively new but program is embracing it and engaging faculty to make quality enhancements in content and pedagogy.
- Faculty is beginning to rotate graduate course coverage responsibility. This redundancy provides delivery continuity in the event of retirement, reassignment or resignation.
- Many library databases & journal holdings available to faculty and students via web.
- Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) consortium makes wide variety of resources available to students.
- Substantial curricular changes over past 4 years to align the program with current needs.
Many graduates go on to pursue Ph.D. Degrees at nationally ranked programs such as University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin, College of William and Mary, Rice University, Tulane, University of South Carolina, and West Virginia University.

III. Program Challenges

- The departmental mission does not make any mention of the master’s level student as a target client or customer. In order for the MA degrees to thrive, the departmental mission should specifically mention their role within the organization.

- Faculty attrition/reassignment issue is making it difficult for consistent delivery of master’s level coursework, advising/mentoring, and faculty service on thesis committees.

- Not clear how many of the 34 full-time faculty are involved with graduate education. How many serve as thesis chairs or readers? How many teach 500 or 600 level courses? Are a few faculty responsible for most of the load?

- Faculty who participate in dual-level seminar courses, as thesis directors or readers are considered “volunteers” or receive a very small stipend (i.e., $300 for thesis director and $100 for thesis reader) to participate. Reward structure should somehow encourage best faculty to participate in graduate instruction and student support.

- Local Regional and Public (LRP) concentration is experiencing serious staffing issues (Dr. Boyd-Bragg retired in 2010, Dr. Kerr left for another university in 2011 and Dr. Hallman & Professor Nash will retire in 2013. Additionally, Dr. Lanier, Coordinator for LRP will assume role as Department Head in 2013). Additional faculty/resources must be allocated to these instructors’ courses.

- The departmental and professional websites (i.e., Shenandoah Valley Oral History and Madison Historical Review) are in need of revision and ongoing maintenance. Faculty lack skills and time necessary to accomplish this.

- Classroom technology is becoming outdated. Wireless access issues cause roadblocks for faculty and guest lecturers. More document cameras needed. Joe Fitzgerald, “Academic Technology Coordinator,” should be actively engaged in maintaining and improving classroom multimedia equipment.

- Faculty is housed in multiple buildings. This makes it difficult to have a collegial and focused organization.

- Jackson Hall classrooms are not set up for “seminar” type class meetings. This configuration is often unsuitable for graduate course meetings.

- Too few fully funded graduate assistantships may result in failure to attract highest quality student. Too much reliance on “Departmental Teaching Assistantships” which do not provide the same amount of tuition support. Additionally, the Commonwealth’s requirement that sixty percent of assistantships go to in-state students makes it difficult to attract the very best individuals.

- GENED Program benefits from Graduate History Teaching Assistants (GHIST 101, 102 and 225). Not clear how GENED, in turn, compensates Graduate History Program or student for this service.

- Alumni engagement is severely lacking. Department needs to utilize services of JMU’s Office of Alumni Relations to locate alumni and to involve them in various aspects of the program. Perhaps a “Graduate Alumni Advisory Board” should be formed.

- Reliance on 400/500 dual level courses. No standardized objective/delivery for “extra hour.”
• Assessment of the learning objective, “Evaluating Peers” seems to take place in “Graduate Research and Writing Seminar” (HIST 673). Successful assessment of this learning objective would include multiple touch points.

• Assessment goal is for cohort of students to average “adequate” across all elements/program objectives. Are students who perform particularly poorly on one or more learning objectives dismissed or discouraged with moving forward with the thesis?

• Graduate Committee should more explicitly utilize assessment results, placement and employer data when reflecting on the program and potential changes.

IV. External Review Team Recommendations

Based on information contained in the self-study report and on the site visit, the external review team makes several recommendations. The team divided the recommendations into two main categories: Major Recommendations and Further Recommendations. The team’s thinking is that the former are high priorities and the latter can be addressed as resources and time permit.

Major Recommendation: Stabilize the LRP Program

The committee believes that the top priority for the JMU MA program should be to stabilize and ultimately enhance the option in Local/Regional/Public (LRP) history. Critical staffing shortages must be addressed in the short term, but the concentration should also be strengthened for the long term. There are several elements to the rationale for this recommendation. First, the nation’s leading professional organizations in the field, the AHA and the OAH, both have recently recognized that in the future history departments should train graduates to work in a broad range of institutions. This is a departure from the traditional focus on training for academic teaching and research positions. These organizations have recognized that audiences and venues for historical scholarship are changing and will continue to do so; opportunities within the academy are likely to narrow, but that demand will continue for skilled interpreters of history in “public” venues such as museums, historic preservation, heritage tourism, archives management, and digital media. JMU’s LRP option already is establishing a reputation in public history. According to recent JMU graduate directors, candidates for the LRP track are generally the strongest in the applicant pool. Available placement data suggest that recent graduates have done very well. Thus the LRP option is already well on its way to being a “program of distinction” in keeping with JMU’s goals for graduate education. The LRP program also makes the JMU history MA program unique in Virginia, as it is the “only one that offers a concentration in public history.” (ISSR page 21) Thus the public history option is what helps the JMU program stand out from others.

It is clear from the ISSR and the team site visit that the LRP option faces serious staffing challenges stemming from retirements, resignations, and reassignments. In particular, as Prof. Lanier becomes department chair, capacity for instruction in core courses will be severely reduced. The committee recommends that the department seek a way to add a net faculty tenure line and hire at the associate or full-professor level. The
committee felt that attempts to fill the gap with adjuncts or fixed-term appointees would not provide for the stability and growth the program needs. The primary purpose of this position would be to provide continuity, leadership, and depth for the LRP program. The committee recognizes that most position arguments for History faculty at JMU are made on the basis of General Education, so it will be important to invest thought into how a compelling case might be made. Several faculty and administrators pointed out that the History Department has lost several teaching faculty to administrative appointments without sufficient compensation to the department. As well, since it seems that general education needs are quite varied, it may be possible to fashion a sound case that incorporates a general education component while still privileging the public history MA program’s needs.

Another route to enhancing the LRP program may be through endowments. The committee recommends that the History department aggressively seek a priority position for the program in the University’s pending Strategic Plan and Capital Campaign. Such resources could help keep the LRP program from being awkwardly tied to undergraduate general education goals. The incoming chair and her colleagues can discuss how new faculty positions or graduate support might be presented as goals for fund raising. The committee separately recommends developing ties with MA program graduates, and this too can provide a platform for fund raising.

In the longer term, once a stable core of LRP faculty is in place, the committee believes that it will be possible to systematically begin seeking small grants and contracts (in the $10-50,000 range) that could be put toward graduate student support. For example, regional DOT offices sometimes award contracts for historic resources survey studies; historical organizations occasionally commission National Register nominations; organizations like the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities have (depending on budget) funded exhibits, publications, teacher institutes, and “research leading to programs that have a direct public audience.” Perhaps the program could also seek partnerships with nonprofit organizations like the Shenandoah Valley Conservancy. One administrator interviewed by the visiting team suggested that even a small grant might be leveraged to secure a tuition waiver commitment from the Graduate School, thus creating a complete graduate assistantship. Projects like these could work to enhance students’ experience, provide contacts for placing the program’s graduates, recruit new students, and provide flexibility in funding.

Major Recommendation: Assess the Balance Between Feeder and Workplace Functions in Light of Changes in the Profession

The ISSR notes that currently the MA program prepares some students to move on to Ph.D. programs, and that the remainder go into the workforce, primarily as public historians or secondary school teachers. The committee designated these as “feeder” and “workplace” functions. According to some faculty interviewed by the committee, the “feeder” mechanism helps students who may come from little known undergraduate institutions, or others who may have spotty undergraduate records but come with renewed commitment.
The committee acknowledges that the MA program has had some notable successes in placing MA graduates in strong Ph.D. programs, but nonetheless we encourage the department to reconsider the balance between “feeder” and “workplace” functions. Studies by the AHA suggest strongly that over the long term the prospects for History Ph.D. graduates are at best uncertain.\(^1\) Overall, the number of History Ph.D. graduates has consistently exceeded the number of openings since the early 1990s. Employment trends vary by field, but the imbalance between candidates and academic openings tends to be worst in fields such as US history, where a major portion of JMU MA theses are completed. Increased use of non-tenure line faculty, a falling proportion of older faculty nearing retirement, and general budget constraints account for these trends, and they will likely persist for the foreseeable future. Another uncertainty is the proliferation of online education. It is not clear what are the implications of free “mega” courses, online courses for which students pay tuition, and for-profit online universities, but it seems likely that they will exert a significant impact on history education and may well result in fewer jobs in conventional bricks-and-mortar settings. Of course there is an intrinsic value to pursuing advanced study for its own sake, but the committee nonetheless recommends that the department seriously consider adjusting the balance between its “feeder” and “workplace” functions so as to send on only students whose outstanding ability or in-demand field of study give them the chance to succeed in a hyper-competitive academic job market. This likely means reducing the proportion of MA students who go on to Ph.D. programs and expanding the proportion of those who enter the workforce.

The eventual balance between “feeder” and “workplace” functions will depend partly on gathering additional data. This brings us to our third major recommendation.

**Major Recommendation: Collect Reliable Data**

The ISSR made general statements about the MA program, but the committee found few hard, quantitative numbers behind these assertions.

Members of the History Department, among them Department Chair Michael Galgano, Director of the Graduate Program Steve Reich, and others, provided helpful perspectives that assisted the team in understanding the graduate program’s historical trends in enrollment, graduation rates, allocation of resources and interplay between students enrolled in the programs three constituencies (United States, World and Local, Regional and Public History). Dean of the Graduate School Reid Linn provided additional data that helped the team understand the program’s financial posture vis-à-vis peer group programs and its current funding levels for teaching assistantships. These perspectives offered a helpful beginning, but the team recommends that the department embrace a more robust posture toward the accumulation, analysis and application of data about its students, its alumni, and enrollment in its courses. Each of these areas, the team thinks, will yield results which

will assist the department in the strategic decisions it will make in the next five years that are key to expanding
the reach of the graduate program and both internal and external support for it, especially the currently untapped
potential for alumni of the program to provide financial and intellectual support.

Who are your constituencies? Potential Ph.D. students, school teachers, and aspiring public historians are
supposedly the program’s three major constituencies and supposedly each account for about a third of students.
However, the data available are insufficient to determine whether this is an accurate assertion. For example,
there is no tally of the number of students intending to teach in secondary schools, or who are already teachers
and have enrolled in order to augment their credentials. It seems that recent changes both at JMU and in the
state of Virginia have altered the potential role for JMU’s graduate history program. JMU eliminated its MAT
program, and its M. Ed program does not specifically require history graduate credits. The state of Virginia
requires 18 graduate credits to satisfy teacher continuing education, well short of the 30 hours required for the
MA. Apparently this means that the teachers who now take graduate courses in History do not necessarily come
in through the regular graduate admission process but are non-degree students served through Outreach. Are
these people even included in the data supplied, then? Do they take all 18 credits at JMU? A better picture of
this constituency is necessary before the department can determine if it actually is able to serve this constituency
within the MA program in history. Are those who are obtaining 18 graduate credits planning to teach AP
history, for example? Is the World history track an attractive option for them?

Information is also lacking on how many students are enrolled in each concentration – World, US, or LPR. The
program admits students according to concentration. Application data from 2009-12 show that about a quarter
of applicants each were in LRP and World, and half in US history. Does this proportion continue in the
admitted/enrolled cohort, or is it different? One faculty member suggested that LRP applicants are stronger, so
is their rate of admission higher? Of course, once in the program students move between concentrations, but it
still should not be hard to get a sense of about how many there are in each track. These basic facts are important
to planning for every aspect of the program, from fund raising to enrollment targets to promotion.

Where are your graduates being placed? As with the data about student constituencies and tracks, information is
also incomplete regarding placement. The Executive Summary suggested that roughly one-third of MA
graduates go on to Ph.D. programs, public history, and secondary teaching. Specific examples were given
about Ph.D. programs and public history placements, but no examples of secondary school teachers were cited,
and no comprehensive placement figures were offered to suggest where MA graduates as a group end up.
Reasonably accurate placement data is very important. It can furnish support for appeals to donors and
administrators, and it can also help identify areas of strength and weakness.

What percent of your capacity is consumed by GENED? It is very clear that GENED consumes a large fraction
of faculty capacity (the most often given figure was 75%), but actual figures were (somewhat surprisingly)
vague, probably owing to the various ways of accounting for GENED loads. There are a lot of data available already, but the committee thought it would be helpful to find a consistent way of presenting them. With that data in hand, it should be easier to see just how much is available for graduate instruction.

Major Recommendation: Locate and Engage Alumni

The recommendation that the department devote more attention to tracking and to communicating with its alumni is, we think, central to expanding the reach and vitality of the graduate program, particularly in the Local, Regional and Public History track. We thus recommend that one graduate student, perhaps the graduate assistant now assigned to work with the Madison Historical Review, be assigned the task of maintaining and updating alumni mailing lists and, working with faculty, fashion a social media strategy—blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, and other social media—to communicate more effectively with the program’s alumni, one facet of a strategy to report the department’s activities and accomplishments more frequently to its alumni with an eye toward keeping both current students and alumni actively engaged with the program.

The department should explore the creation of an Alumni Advisory Board. This body would serve not only as vehicle to mentor current students but assume an important role in job referrals and employment. Meetings of this body would also provide opportunities for alumni to return to campus and to make presentations to current students on their work and research. The creation of an Alumni Advisory Board and inauguration of more effective alumni communication via social media can, we think, play an important role in recruiting donors to the program.

Major Recommendation: Consider the Role of Undergraduate/Graduate Teaching – Especially GENED

We understand and commend the department’s admirable commitment to the University’s General Education curriculum. Our conversations convinced us, however, that the Department’s current general education posture should be thoroughly reviewed and discussed. The data we reviewed with respect to how much of the department teaching capacity is devoted to the General Education Curriculum could, we think, be used more effectively to calculate the number of FTE faculty General Education courses generate and whether capacity exists to allocate additional faculty resources to the graduate program.

We understand that the Department reached its current posture over the course of several decades and several iterations of the University’s General Education Curriculum. The graduate program in history, especially the LRP track, we think, demands significant additional faculty participation. The current allocation faculty to General Education courses, and to a lesser degree courses for the historic major, appear to constrain the Department’s ability to respond easily to what we sense was a critical need to support the LRP track. Review of the Department’s current posture will, we think, provide an opportunity for the faculty to seek a more appropriate balance between General Education offerings and graduate teaching.
**Major Recommendation: Reduce or Eliminate 400/500 Split Classes – Beginning with Topical Historiographical Classes**

We understand that the Department has made a firm commitment to bring an end to the current practice of offering “split” courses, upper-level history courses in which a limited number of graduate students also enroll. We concur with this decision. The faculty who teach these classes responded to the need to create special discussion sections for graduate students innovatively, some by scheduling a fourth hour each week and some by creating what equates as a shadow seminar that meets three hours per week. Both solutions, while applauded by current graduate students, constitute *de facto* course overloads. The migration of topical historiographical courses to 600-level graduate level offerings should continue under the rotation system now being put in place that will provide leadership for 600-level courses for the next five years.

As the Department increases its offering of distinctive 600-level graduate courses, it will also need to review those courses in the LRP track for which dual enrollment of undergraduate and graduate students may remain appropriate. Graduate students in the LRP track typically enter the program with no prior coursework in public history. For them, and for JMU undergraduate history majors, LRP courses are, and will for the foreseeable future remain introductory in nature, the first course in historic preservation, for example, for both undergraduate and graduate students. For this constituency within the history program, “mixed” 400/500-level courses appear to be a workable solution in an area that relies heavily on adjunct instructors.

**Further Recommendation: Visibility of the History MA Program**

Despite the various positive developments within the History MA Program, it should be noted that the visibility of the program on state and national levels is comparatively low, especially in the area of digital media and communications. The review team recommends that the program seek to increase its visibility. A logical first step involves a completely updated Internet presence and presentation. It may be appropriate to seek input from the School of Media Arts and Design (SMAD) at JMU or even to make the web redesign a SMAD student project. Besides a simple redesign of the webpage, an integration of social network tools like Facebook and twitter, among others, should be considered.

**Further Recommendation: Marketing of the Program, in particular the LRP track**

In addition to a redesign of the web-presence of the History Graduate Program, it is appropriate to develop active marketing strategies targeted toward potential applicants to the program, in particular for the LRP track as this track has the greatest potential for state and national relevance. Utilizing the existing undergraduate networks such as Phi-Alpha-Theta, undergrad research conferences hosted throughout the country, professional networks and organizations focusing on the various aspects of public history and museum work for such an active marketing / recruiting of applicants would seem to be both feasible and appropriate. It is recommended that the History Graduate Program seek direct contact with these organizations and present, in particular, the LPR track at the respective meetings.
Further Recommendation: James Madison Historical Review

The function of the James Madison Historical Review needs to be evaluated. The journal has not reached the status originally intended. Moreover, the learning objectives of operating such a journal (i.e., peer review by graduate students) are achieved within other mandatory parts of the program (i.e., History 673). If the James Madison Historical Review is continued, reallocation of resources currently used for the journal should be considered. Perhaps the TA Position currently dedicated to the journal could be reassigned and the journal’s workload shared among a group of graduate students. This would insure that the educational aspects of publishing such a journal benefit a larger group.

Further Recommendation: Graduate Student Support

The adequacy of graduate student financial support offered at JMU, in comparison to other schools offering the MA as a terminal degree, is unclear. Without reliable data on level of support at other schools, it is not possible to successfully petition for an increase in the total financial package; nor can it be concluded whether students apply for the program because of its academic merits or because of the level of support. Prior to acting on the level of financial support, it is critical to solicit the respective data from comparable programs. Such data can be gathered informally by direct contact between the Graduate Program Directors of JMU and those of other history graduate programs.

Further Recommendation: Dedicated Office Space for Graduate Students

The space dedicated to graduate students in the History Department is inadequate for their needs. Teaching Assistants hold office hours for undergraduate students in a shared, one-room office that offers little privacy for conversations about assignments and grades. The office is shared with graduate students who attempt to conduct research and class assignments, simultaneously. In addition, there are only three computers and one printer available for graduate students in this office, thereby limiting those who can be working at a given time. Providing the graduate students with a more functional workspace would reinforce the stance of the Department that they are a valued constituency of James Madison University.

Further Recommendation: Dean of Libraries for Graduate Student Space in Carrier Library Expansion

Carrier Library, where many history-related materials are housed, is not currently serving graduate student needs. Graduate students often compete with the overwhelming number of undergraduates for quiet workspace. Graduate student research and study habits tend to be quite different from that of an undergraduate, resulting in dissimilar needs in library public spaces. Proactively working with the Dean of Libraries to ensure a devoted graduate student workspace in the Carrier Library expansion project would alleviate stress on the graduate student to find a quiet and comfortable place in the library. In addition, graduate students often forego their University holidays in order to complete class assignments or thesis work. Operating hours during University holidays are often unaccommodating to graduate students who wish to remain on campus to do research and
work. Petitioning the Dean of Libraries to reach some compromise for extended holiday hours would be greatly beneficial for graduate students.

**Further Recommendation: Introduce Clear Standards for Recognition of Graduate Teaching**

Due to the current state of the Graduate Program’s course offerings, it is unclear as to how professors are recognized, financially or otherwise, for their participation in the Program. Professors teaching a 600-level class are able to count it toward their teaching load, while the 400/500 level classes seem to only further burden the Professor with additional responsibilities that are not compensated. Professors volunteer their time and energy to creating an additional syllabus, teaching a “fourth hour”, and grading graduate student work in the 400/500 classes and receive no compensation and cannot count the extra efforts toward their required teaching load.

Until these split-level classes are phased out in favor of strictly 600-level classes for Graduate Students, clear-cut standards need to be put in place for the recognition of graduate teaching. Financial compensation, contribution to the required teaching load, or another suitable form of recognition should be put into place immediately.

**Further Recommendation: Faculty Development for Role as Mentor to Teaching Assistants**

Teaching Assistants and Graduate Assistants are assigned to professors to aid in grading, teaching, and meeting with undergraduate students. Faculty and graduate students often prize the arrangement; however, it requires a certain amount of mentorship on the part of the professor to train TAs and GAs. Many faculty members expressed an interest and desire for a structure to this relationship, perhaps through a training seminar. Graduate Students, in turn, seek standardized requirements and expectations of their TA and GA responsibilities. Seeking outside support, perhaps through the CFI, or creating an internal seminar would be advantageous to both the professor and assisting graduate student in providing the best possible experience for all parties involved.

**Further Recommendation: Mission Statement**

We encourage the department and its faculty as they enter an important period of transition in leadership to review and revise both the department's mission statement and, more pertinent to this report, the mission statement adopted by the department's graduate program.

Both statements read as additive, layered constructions in which tried and true postures and purposes were glossed by newer imperatives and opportunities, some no doubt prompted as the University's itself embraced broader purposes. Adoption of a new mission statement after the careful discussion and deliberations (perhaps achieved through a strategic planning retreat facilitated by someone from outside the department's faculty) that should attend this process will result, first, in language that is cleaner, more concise, and more direct and, second, define current purpose as well as hone future directions.
Further Recommendation: Marketing
We observe that the number of applicants to the graduate program has remained relatively static. We found the students with whom we met to be bright, energetic, and articulate but think that expansion of the applicant pool will extend reach of the program as well as boost the quality of students who enroll in it. There were 38 applications for admission with the cohort that entered the program in the fall of 2012, a number that suggests that to gather a class of 15 most applicants were deemed acceptable. Increasing the pool of applicants will also allow the department to balance the number of students in each of its three tracks more effectively than seems now the case.

Further Recommendation: Peer Group Creation
The Department should make more explicit comparisons with peer group programs. In Virginia, the peer group for MA-level history degrees would include George Mason University, Old Dominion University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. In public history, the net might be cast broader to include not only George Mason University but an older, more established program such as Arizona State, Middle Tennessee State University, North Carolina State, University of West Georgia and the University of South Carolina.