Dear Members of the Curriculum Council:

In light of our conversation on Friday, the History Department Curriculum Committee wanted to add a few words of further explanation about our proposal. The “justification” statement in the on-line proposal lays out the broad outlines of our thinking but does not get into the details of assignments or the reasoning behind them.

The chief benefit of a change from three to four credits is that it will allow students to work on their writing. We find that our students vary considerably in their abilities to write, from those who compose lucid and forceful prose to those who struggle at the most elemental level with sentence structure. The initial push for a conversion from three to four credits grew out of a meeting with our majors, who were invited to speak to the Department’s teaching discussion group about their writing experiences in our courses. The students encouraged faculty not only to assign more writing, but to think about ways in which different facets of writing might be treated in our courses. While we have left individual assignments up to the discretion of each instructor, the extra credit hour of course work will enable faculty to work more intensively with students on two fronts.

First, we will be able to assign more formal writing assignments, including additional take-home essays and exams. Such work asks students to engage a different mode of historical inquiry than many have encountered in earlier training. In contrast to the common experience that many students have had in secondary school, which asks them to recount what has happened in the past, our courses emphasize that students need to interpret the past, which they do by addressing substantial questions for which there is no “right” or “wrong” answer, but rather more or less persuasive answers depending on how one defines terms, uses evidence, and structures an argument. Did the Federal Constitution betray the American Revolution? Was there an alternative to Cold War? We want students to uncover what is at stake in such questions and make historical arguments that synthesize the work of historians and draw heavily on primary materials.

Second, the extra contact hour can be used for in-class writing exercises that will better help students consider the individual steps needed to compose longer essays: workshops on common grammatical errors, on effective introductions, on topic sentences, on paragraphs that are structured around a single governing idea and sustained by carefully chosen examples, and on strategies for pulling an argument through an entire essay. We believe as well that good writing is intimately tied to careful reading, and so we want students to engage critically the monographs and articles we assign by prominent historians in the field: What is a given book about? What is the author’s research question and why is it important? What is the argument of the book? How persuasive is the evidence upon which it is based? The same sorts of questions pertain to “primary materials,” those written by historical actors themselves. What inspires a given person to write? To whom are they writing? What are they promoting in their texts? What kinds of questions do they obscure, intentionally or otherwise? These
sorts of questions can be part of small group discussions, informal writing in class, or discussion board exercises. But this sort of work cannot be done in either surveys or upper division courses at present without sacrificing significant content. A conversion to four credits will afford the faculty the time to help students have more sustained, critical, and meaningful engagement with the course material.

The History Department had taken on these changes in part to better serve our majors, but also with the University’s mission to write across the curriculum. The vast majority of the students we teach are non-majors. We recognize from our conversations with our colleagues in other disciplines that these students may not get the opportunity to write as much as desired. Increasing our courses from three to four credits will give them that chance. We believe that the writing skills that students learn in our courses will serve them well after graduation in whatever profession they choose. Finally, it is our hope that careful attention to writing will promote a rigorous and intelligent civic engagement – one of the great promises of a college education.

Jon Katz
Ben Mutschler
Nicole von Germeten