

Forum on Capstone Courses

The History Capstone Course at Saint Peter's College, Jersey City

By Eugenia M. Palmegiano and Jerome J. Gillen

2. *Editor's Note: In this second part of the forum on capstone courses (the first part of which appeared in April 2009), the three essays discuss capstone courses in terms of the authors' varied personal experiences in the classroom as well in terms of the institutional contexts*



The capstone, course in the history department of Saint Peter's College was launched in academic year 1989 as a result of a two-year self-study. Members of the department as well as an outside evaluator agreed that students should participate in a research-intensive seminar in their senior year. Faculty then had to fit this seminar into a learning experience that included both general and departmental requirements.

Saint Peter's College is a Jesuit institution with a multicultural population of divergent skills. The college has always had a core curriculum. Although the content of this core curriculum has changed over time, its goals--to prepare students for a life of learning and of service to others--have remained the same. Specifically, the core curriculum seeks to assist students in developing the skills of thinking critically, reading carefully, speaking and writing clearly, organizing materials in context, and understanding the mores of different societies. Because these aims fit well with history as a discipline, all courses in the department reflect them. Within this core, the department offers a two-semester course that focuses on the Western tradition and global perspectives.

While; this course sequence introduces students to primary sources. it does not segregate sections by majors. To assist them in dealing with such evidence, as well as to reinforce the "skills" goals of the core, the department requires majors to enroll in a survey of U.S. history. This course is intended to

develop students' abilities to handle primary sources and appreciate the fundamentals of historiography, particularly the implications of variant interpretations of a subject. The department also prepares students for the capstone seminar by mandating that they take four of the eight electives necessary for graduation in four different areas, ranging from premodern history to the history of the non-Western world. In each of these courses, students must write a paper and present their findings orally. Thus, they have the opportunity to use a wide range of evidence before they come to the capstone.

The capstone seminar, which is offered in the fall term, has two features. One, the thematic, changes each year according to the specialty of the faculty member directing the seminar. The department decided that such rotation provides every faculty member the opportunity to lead the seminar, albeit infrequently, and to share with students research in his/her area at a level that would not ordinarily occur in other courses. The themes of the last two years were the Scientific Revolution, and the United States in the 1960s. In fall 2009 the theme will be the Victorian "High Noon," 1851-1867.

 **RESEARCH GRANTS FROM THE AHA** 

Deadline for AHA Research Grants

Applications for the **Bernadotte E. Schmitt Grants**, the **Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in the History of the Western Hemisphere**, the **Michael Kraus Research Grants**, and the **Littleton-Griswold Grants** are all due on **February 15, 2010**

About the AHA Research Grants

The Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in the Western Hemisphere are available to support research in the history of the Western hemisphere; individual grants do not exceed \$1,000.

The Michael Kraus Research Grant in colonial American history, with particular reference to the intercultural aspects of American and European relations, offers cash awards of up to \$800.

The Littleton-Griswold Grant offers grants of up to \$1,000 for research in U.S. legal history and the field of law and society.

The Bernadotte Schmitt Grants support research in the history of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Individual grants will not exceed \$1,000.

Note: Only AHA members are eligible to apply for these grants. All grants are offered annually and are intended to further research in progress. Preference is given to advanced doctoral students, non-tenured faculty, and unaffiliated scholars. They may be used for travel to a library or archive; microfilming, photography, or photocopying; borrowing or access fees; and similar research expenses.

For more information, log onto www.historians.org/prizes/grants.htm

The second feature of the capstone, which remains the same irrespective of the director, is concentration on the historiography of the topic and its in-depth investigation. To prepare students to deal with a plethora of interpretations about the theme, faculty directors have recently required that juniors read background materials of some sophistication in the summer prior to the course. This practice allows students to engage in meaningful discussion from the outset and, some-

times, to determine before classes commence what aspect of the topic they would like to pursue for their seminar papers.

These seminar papers are required to be derived substantively from original material and display the characteristics relating to thinking, reading, writing, and organizing that reflect the goals of the college's core curriculum. In addition, the paper has to demonstrate the ability to put its topic into historical context. This last requirement presents

the greatest problem for students who conventionally think in a linear time frame rather than a simultaneous one across intellectual as well as geographical boundaries. Recognizing that students may have problems in this endeavor, the Faculty decided to mandate that students submit multiple drafts of their work. These submissions give them the advantages of the professor's ongoing critiques and the experiences of the working historian as they reconsider evidence and sharpen their analysis and writing.

Following final submission of a 25- to 30-page paper, students must present their findings orally to their colleagues and the seminar director. Other members of the department and of affiliated departments are also invited to these sessions along with the dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In their presentations students must once again show that they know how to do history, explaining their research in correct and coherent language and answering questions posed by attendees.

The department expects the students graduating from the capstone seminar to have progressed well beyond the core curriculum's goals in developing their intellectual and communication skills, to have evinced the mindset of the historian and a grasp of the mechanics of history, and to have exhibited the qualities essential to function in the global world of the 21st century. However, the faculty is realistic. To gauge how well students have performed, the department conducts its own survey asking them to comment on the merits and demerits of the seminar. Members take the results very seriously and have undertaken renovation of the capstone seminar over the years. Finally, to come full circle, students evaluate the seminar as part of their overall program, since the college circulates its own survey for every course every semester. This document is more general, it does something the departmental survey cannot do. It reports professorial performance in numerous categories and ranks each in relation to all other faculty. This sobering reminder of our weaknesses is always good for the department and always an impetus to improve. Alternatively, the high marks that history faculty often achieve underlines how history serves students as the backdrop for all other courses.

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C. Two Most Recent Surveys

*Fall 2010 Survey of Senior History Majors
HS-499, Tuleja Seminar
December 2010*

1. Required Courses

5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree, 3=Neutral; 2=Disagree; I=Strongly Disagree; N/A=Not applicable

A two semester American history survey is important to the history major.

(5) 7 (4) 7 (3) (2) 1 (1)

Every history major must take a broad variety of courses, as reflected in the distribution requirements.

(5) 9 (4) 4 (3) 2 (2) (1)

A history department must offer at least one course that has a broad cultural perspective.

(5) 7 (4) 5 (3) 2 (2) (1)

A history major at St. Peter's should learn about the international character of Jesuit education in history courses.

(5) 2 (4) 6 (3) (2) 4 (1) 2

1

I learned the basics about how to read and evaluate primary sources from my core courses and the American history survey.

(5) 4 (4) 6 (3) 3 (2) 1 (1) 1

I learned the basics of writing in a historical format in the American history survey.

(5) 2 (4) 7 (3) 5 (2) 5 (1)

Every history elective taught me something about historiography.

(5) 6 (4) 8 (3) 1 (2) (1)

I was required to write multi-draft essays in every history elective.

(5) 9 (4) 3 (3) (2) 3 (1)

I found field trips a valuable part of my history major.

(5) 2 (4) 1 (3) 5 (2) I (1) 2 (N/A) 4

The Tuleja Seminar gave me an in-depth knowledge of the historiography of its subject.

(5) 10 (4) 3 (3) 1 (2) (1)

The research paper I wrote for the Tuleja Seminar brought together the lessons I had learned in earlier electives about research & the evaluation of primary & secondary material.

(5) 7 (4) 6 (3) 2 (2) (1) 2

*Fall 2009 Survey of Senior History Majors
 HS-499, Tuleja Seminar- Results as of 1/8/2010
 December 2009*

3. Required Courses

5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree, 3=Neutral; 2=Disagree; 1 =Strongly Disagree; *N/A*=Not applicable

A two semester American history survey is important to the history major.

(5) 4 (4) 4 (3) (2) (1) *NIA*

Every history major must take a broad variety of courses, as reflected in the distribution requirements.

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A history department must offer at least one course that has a broad cultural perspective.

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A history major at St. Peter's should learn about the international character of Jesuit education in history courses.

(5) 2 (4) 1 (3) 3 (2) 2 (1) *NIA*

I learned the basics about how to read and evaluate primary sources from my core courses and the American history survey.

(5) 3 (4) 4 (3) 1 (2) (1) *NIA*

I learned the basics of writing in a historical format in the American history survey.

(5) 1 (4) 3 (3) 2 (2) 1 (1) *NIA*

Every history elective taught me something about historiography.

(5) 4 (4) 3 (3) 1 (2) (1) *NIA*

I was required to write multi-draft essays in every history elective.

(5) 6 (4) 2 (3) (2) (1) *NIA*

I found field trips a valuable part of my history major.

(5) 1 (4) 1 (3) (2) (1) *NIA 6*

The Tuleja Seminar gave me an in-depth knowledge of the historiography of its subject.

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The research paper I wrote for the Tuleja Seminar brought together the lessons I had learned in earlier electives about research & the evaluation of primary & secondary material.

(5) 6 (4) 1 (3) (2) (1) *NIA*