Executive Summary

Department of History
Self-Study 2007

The Department of History has made extraordinary progress since the last program review. At the time of the last external review of the department, the faculty had adopted a strategic plan to develop two areas of specialization that would provide the department with a clear intellectual identity and yet allow for the development of a geographically and chronologically diverse department. Faculty determined to focus on developing two areas of expertise--one, labor and urban history; and two, the history of governance and citizenship. By following its 2001 strategic plan in a disciplined manner, the Department focused on appointments in its areas of expertise. Since 1999, it made tenure-track appointments that developed faculty strength in urban and labor history and in the history of governance and citizenship. The Department has largely accomplished this task and, at the same time, expanded the geographical reach of its faculty. The result is both a faculty and a curriculum that are intellectually coherent, yet geographically and chronologically diverse. In this way, the Department advanced both the University’s urban mission and its mission in global education. Only one piece of the strategic plan is missing: the appointment of a specialist in United States urban history. The department brings attention to its strengths with the annual North American Labor History Conference and the annual conference of the Center for the Study of Citizenship.

At the last review, the Department was facing devastating retirements. At the time, the department had only 1.5 (FTE) European historians; no historian of Asia; the imminent reduction in staffing in African history; and no full-time scholar specializing in the history of Latin America. Today, the Department has 5.5 FTE European historians, two specialists in Asian history, two African historians, and a full-time Latin Americanist. Moreover, it has a specialist in colonial American history, a crucial position missing in the department for nearly two decades. The result is a faculty with an emerging identity that is better able to fulfill its departmental, graduate, and undergraduate missions and advances the University’s global and urban missions.

The Department has moved vigorously to fulfill its mission in graduate history education by reforming graduate fields that cut across traditional geographical boundaries in order to encourage the development of coherent academic programs for graduate students. This approach fosters fruitful interaction among faculty and enhances the global mission of the university. The Department also seeks to fulfill its mission in graduate history education by establishing new graduate-only readings courses in United States history, in modern and early modern Europeans history, and in world history. The last addresses a recommendation made in the last review of the Department, but inadequate faculty resources have delayed their implementation until the present.

The Department fulfills its research mission in undergraduate education with the innovative Sterne-Lion Undergraduate Research Award. The award provides additional funding for history majors who win one of the university’s coveted Undergraduate
Research Awards. The additional support provided by the Sterne-Lion Award has enabled undergraduate majors to conduct research at archives in Great Britain, Nova Scotia, and South Dakota. Thus far the winners have produced well researched and remarkably good research papers and have presented their work at a department colloquium. The Sterne-Lion Award raises the level of undergraduate research and fosters excellence in history education. It also helps the university to fulfill its goal of enhancing undergraduate research and has provided a model for the Department of Economics, which is adopting a similar program.

The Department also fulfills its global mission (and helps the university to fulfill its global education mission) with: its rigorous, globally focused undergraduate curriculum, which requires majors to take courses in several of the world’s geographical regions; the introduction of a new M.A. in World history; the development of a proposal to establish a graduate certificate in world history aimed at helping school teachers to develop the knowledge to teach the newly mandated high-school requirement in world history.

In sum, the Department of History is thriving. An outstanding senior faculty is now complemented by an extremely accomplished junior cohort. Moreover, recruitment of superb junior faculty has facilitated the successful recruitment of faculty who are among the most sought after in the country. The Department has dramatically strengthened its graduate program by revamping the curriculum and expanding its graduate-only courses, and it is about to address concerns about graduate student recruitment and professional development. In undergraduate education, the Sterne-Lion Award is a model for others to follow, as is our rigorous and diverse undergraduate curriculum. With the appointment of an urban historian and improved support for its graduate students, the Department of History at Wayne State University will be prepared for a promising future.