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Megan Birk

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SYMPOSIUM ON THE HISTORY JOBS CRISIS

MEGAN BIRK

U.S. History as Part of a Core Curriculum

It never occurred to me that I would write a Texas-centered piece for *The Middle West Review*, but desperate times call for additional information. Much of the emphasis on the “civics crisis” in the U.S. over the last ten years focused on K-12 curriculum, and the startling lack of historical and governmental knowledge attained before high school graduation. But the problem runs deeper than K-12, with increasingly fewer institutions of higher education including U.S. history in their core curriculum. Texas is among the states that continues to require U.S. history as part of a public college education. Added in 1955, the relevant section of the Texas Education Code reads in part: “A college or university receiving state support or state aid from public funds may not grant a baccalaureate degree or a lesser degree or academic certificate to any person unless the person has credit for six semester hours or its equivalent in American History.”²¹ In the middle of the Cold War, these six credits joined the six already required in Government/Political Science that were included by the Texas Legislature in 1929. Among the others states with such a mandate are California, which has “American Institutions” graduation options, and Georgia’s universities which must include U.S. history with state content.

Texas’s requirement is not static. Recent adjustments to this law included adding equivalent surveys in Mexican American History, Native American History, African American History, U.S. Women’s History, and others. At a time when departments across the country, but particularly in the Midwest, are facing death by a thousand cuts, these six hours help keep departments in Texas open. However, the shrinking campus cores, the diminishing number of degree plans allowing electives and minors, and the limitations on financial aid that cover *only* what is in the degree plan are affecting us all. Some

of us have the added issue of eyeing each legislative session with no small amount of concern about the future of tenure and the academic freedom to teach accurate U.S. history. Each time the administrative positions on campuses change hands there is worry about the ratio of full-time to contingent faculty. The six hours of required history are stabilizing to a degree.

There is, however, a caveat. While history core classes provide a solid foundation of funds to colleges and departments as steady sources of Student Credit Hours (SCHs) and enable faculty to advertise and recruit for other history classes, this is by no means a monopolized system for four-year institutions. Students in Texas have been pushed into dual enrollment classes, which allows qualified students to take “college classes” in high school and earn credit prior to graduation. More and more students are arriving on campuses “core complete” because of this program designed to save the state, and ostensibly some parents, tuition money, but it comes at the cost of diminishing credit hours for departments and serious concern about the quality and content of dual enrollment classes in high school buildings. Texas also has a robust system of community colleges that are often partnered with their local university. The faculty at these institutions teach a wide array of U.S. history offerings that can be transferred to four-year schools, and many of them employ faculty with PhDs.

Ironically, this surge of dual enrollment enthusiasm provided short term boosts to graduate programs across the state, as local teachers worked nights to earn the hours needed to teach those classes in high school. According to the accrediting standards of SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges), eighteen hours of graduate credit are the minimums required to teach core curriculum history courses for college credit. In other words, someone doesn’t even need to earn a master’s degree to hypothetically qualify. A temporary increase in graduate students with the potential result of fewer undergraduates down the road was a brutal catch-22 for many departments.

At my university of thirty-thousand-plus students, our history department is staffed by approximately twenty tenured and tenure-track faculty and ten full-time lecturers, almost all of whom have PhDs. This year we hope to hire two new colleagues for tenure-track positions to begin Fall 2023. Currently we have just a handful of part-time faculty; so far my department has mostly avoided the highly exploitative tactic of hiring faculty for part-time work with no benefits or job security. Despite the substantial growth in enrollment and some hiring, in the last ten years we have lost

more faculty to retirements and departures than we replaced with tenure-track lines. In comparison to the jarring numbers in Jon Lauck's recent editorial piece, we have drawn the long straw.² But administrators across the country are lining up to suggest the next "great" money-saving idea, whether it be MOOCS, "graders" overseas to enable giant sections, off-site online faculty with no benefits and lower salaries, or departments staffed by precariously employed faculty.

Having noted both the dire hiring situation of the last fifteen years and the forceful emphasis on pushing students into STEM programs at the expense of skill building and well-rounded educations, my department has tried to adapt. I work at a public, regional university that emphasizes teaching. On my campus we use the contact time of our required history classes to showcase the skills and knowledge that make history a compelling major, second major, or minor for students. Along with other programs in liberal arts, we have spent the last five years adding additional history classes to the electives lists that count for other parts of our campus core. We are working on including more upper-division classes to the degree plans of other majors. Currently we have more than a dozen classes in the degree plans of other fields, and while these partnerships are most common in the interdisciplinary degrees of Environmental Studies, Mexican American Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Sciences, Public Heritage, and Medical Humanities, other programs are beginning to see the need for improved broad-based training and asking us for history coursework relevant to their fields. We are fortunate to have enough faculty still employed to offer these cross-discipline classes. Each of them is a recruiting opportunity.

I agree with Jon's assessment that state legislatures should be aggressively lobbied to reconstruct better, more forward-looking core requirements that suit the needs of students and employers alike. It goes beyond the need for civics education. I think our next push to get more history classes for students across campus should be related to the terribly named "soft-skills." The decades-long emphasis on STEM has stripped basic abilities out of too many degrees. Employers in Texas and beyond are complaining, loudly in some cases, about students who arrive equipped with highly specialized knowledge, but no ability to lead a meeting, present to clients, problem-solve independently, or write a synthesis of their work. More than 90 percent of employers value communications skills, but only 40 percent believe that new graduates are proficient in this category. Also highly important

are critical thinking and global/multicultural fluency.³ History and some of our liberal arts colleagues already teach these things. We need to be more assertive about the ways that history education at the college level prepares students with a wide array of these sought-after skills. Students are increasingly discouraged from pursuing flexibility—they have been trained for one thing, and employers in the private and public sectors are beginning to push back on that type of education. Author Katharine Brooks refers to the “pressure of the linear path,” which expects teenagers to know what they will major in, and precisely what job they will do—that the major will line up with the career. But as she points out, this is outdated thinking and historians should be among those refuting the idea that a degree equals a specific job, and with it a specific earning power.⁴ The American Historical Association has provided data to fight the notion of low-paying jobs for history degree earners and has highlighted the diversity of fields in which history majors find work.

Perhaps like many of you, I want to train students for so much more than just work. Historians share a deep connection to the process of discovery and life-long learning. We are committed to reshaping our own assumptions, adjusting our understanding based on evidence, and helping our students understand the process of doing history, as much as learning the facts of events. We teach students *why* things happened in addition to how; we help them make sense of their own lived experiences; we help them relate to the world around them and broaden their understanding of how big and richly textured the world is, and always has been. But I am also a realist who understands that dollars make decisions in today’s public higher education. History is a marketable degree. It teaches most of the skills that are consistently ranked in the top 10 percent of employers’ expectations for new hires. Legislators respond to business and industry, and those groups are telling us that the skills historians master and then teach are critical to their future success. Our advising centers need to know and understand this. So do our colleagues in the sciences, business, and health care fields. No career services department should be without a liaison in the history department who can prime the pump with information about how to market history skills to a wide range of possible employers.

Every college and university in the nation is well aware of the looming demographic dive we are about to experience in the number of students heading our way in the decade to come. According to CUPA-HR (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources) the project-

ed decline in students is more than 15 percent across the Midwest.⁵ Enrollment growth will not help departments rebound in size, so other tactics are needed. In 1955, Texas made the decision to add six hours to the core curriculum because in the middle of the Cold War, patriotism and civic pride were viewed as critical pieces of the future. Today, in addition to appealing to the continuing needs of a functioning democracy, we need to emphasize what history education offers to the various constituencies of our institutions and make a case for skills in addition to knowledge.

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Megan Birk is a Professor of History at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She is the author of *The Fundamental Institution* and *Fostering on the Farm*, both with the University of Illinois Press, and currently serves as the MHA Vice-President/President-Elect.

NOTES

1. “A Crisis in Civic Education,” American Council of Trustees and Alumni, accessed Jan. 10, 2023, https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/ee/download/A_Crisis_in_Civic_Education.pdf; Texas Education Code, *American or Texas History* (1955), sec. 51.302
2. Jon Lauck, “Introduction: The Ongoing History Crisis,” *Middle West Review* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2022): vii–xi.
3. “Employers Rate Career Competencies, New Hire Proficiency,” National Association of Colleges and Employers, accessed Jan. 10, 2023, <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/employers-rate-career-competencies-new-hire-proficiency/>.
4. Katharine Brooks, *You Majored in What? Designing Your Path from College to Career* (New York: Penguin, 2009), ch. 1.
5. Missy Kline, “The Looming Higher Ed Enrollment Cliff,” accessed Jan. 10, 2023, <https://www.cupahr.org/issue/feature/higher-ed-enrollment-cliff/>.