

Review of Lehman College History Department

Dr. Andrew August, Penn State Abington

Dr. Gwen Kay, SUNY Oswego

Executive Summary

The Lehman College History Department espouses, and fulfills, the goals of the institution as a whole. The undergraduate program has, against school and national trends, grown since its last self-study. The faculty are engaged in scholarly, creative and community activity. The adjuncts feel supported; the tenure-track faculty are working to not only teach within the Graduate Center but also develop their own online Masters program. The department could better position itself within the college, and attract even more majors, if it updated learning outcomes to align with skills in the work force including information literacy, intellectual integrity, and how the past informs the present and shapes the future, in addition to critical analysis and well-reasoned arguments. Hiring a Latin American scholar, and an office administrator, will only enhance the ability of the department to continue functioning so well.

What are the major strengths of the program?

Undergraduate Enrollments: A major area of strength for the Lehman College History Department is the strong trend in enrollment in the undergraduate majors. In a context in which many institutions have seen significant declines in humanities majors and Lehman College's overall enrollment has fallen, Lehman College's history programs have enrolled between 114 and 125 majors from 2016 to 2021, with the highest number in 2021. Student course credits have also remained strong (2595 in 2016 and 2733 in 2021). In the current context, it is essential that the department continue to serve its undergraduate major population well, as such enrollments are the basis on which continued resources will likely depend.

Faculty Engagement, Commitment, and Morale: The Lehman College history faculty are committed to their teaching and research activities. They have a strong departmental identity and function well as a unit. The department has been successful overall in retaining faculty, and thus there is strong continuity and sense of departmental identity. Two recent successful hires reflect the faculty's ability to work together and come to a consensus. The department also benefits from the contribution of a large and stable group of part-time faculty. College leadership recognizes that the faculty functions well.

Leadership: The history department has benefitted from strong and consistent leadership under Chair Marie Marianetti. She has served as chair for over a dozen years, and the faculty expressed satisfaction with her leadership and advocacy for the department. The strong sense of satisfaction and departmental culture reflect this leadership. It is not clear what the succession plan looks like for the chair position.

Location: Lehman College's location in the Bronx is a major source of strength. It has access to a dynamic population center as a basis for recruiting students. Part of the college's success in retaining faculty is doubtless due to its location. New York City offers opportunities for students to engage with institutions dedicated to history and culture in the metropolitan region.

Student Diversity: Lehman College serves a diverse student population. Approximately half of the student population identifies as Hispanic/Latino/a, with a third identifying as Black. The department's "Self Study Report" identifies the benefits of having students from varied backgrounds together in class. The College's role in serving Hispanic populations connects Lehman to a growing population amidst broader demographic challenges (especially predicted declines in numbers of high school graduates). The commitment to transfer students, and the relationship with the undergraduate advisor, aids in retention of these students.

Space/Technology: On our visit, there was almost no discussion of challenges with space or with the availability of technology. Our visit to classrooms revealed modern learning technologies, allowing delivery to remote students. While the Self-Study report indicated that technology in Carmen 201 is no longer modern, there appears to be a plan in place to upgrade that space. The Self Study indicates that office space is adequate. One possible area of concern lies in the use of personal laptops as teaching tools. It may be that the Lehman standard of desktop computers should be reconsidered.

What are the major opportunities?

Online MA: The faculty have expressed interest in building an online MA program in history. This is in response to declining enrollment in the existing MA program and aligns with an apparent Lehman-wide initiative to develop online programs. There appears to be significant interest in developing such a program among history faculty, who are committed to a model of supporting MA students with a high degree of attentive mentorship. While the department's self-study identifies a market in the Bronx, Westchester County, and New York City, it may be possible to extend interest in the online MA beyond this geographic region. The creation of an online MA would require support in advertising and promotion, developing graduate-only classes, as well as the acceptance of small initial enrollments during the program's development.

Public History: Lehman College's location offers vast opportunities for students to engage in public history. It is not clear that the department has encouraged this pathway for majors or emphasized internship opportunities. While public history as a discipline does not appear to be within the expertise of many of the history faculty, this is an area that could attract students and offer them experiences in the region and connections that could lead to employment opportunities within the field.

Collaboration with Other Disciplines: The Self-Study document reports a particularly strong relationship with the nearby departments of Africana Studies and Latin American and Latino

Studies. The document also reports strong relations with a number of other departments and units at Lehman, and the MA program benefits from the enrollment of Social Studies Education and Master of Liberal Arts students in MA courses. These relationships present opportunities to strengthen and support history programs and offer students chances to work across disciplines with faculty support.

Supporting Teaching: Adjunct faculty feel valued and supported by the department. They know that their teaching is integral to program offerings. Since the forced shift to virtual classrooms (spring 2020), many adjuncts no longer are physically present. This has decreased their connections with each other, and with the larger department; it has also decreased their ability to discuss pedagogy, sit in each other's classes for different perspectives, and collaborate. The department's decision to decline hiring lecturers, while for good, moral reasons, means instability (or, lack of stability) for some adjuncts who might otherwise have more job security.

What challenges does it face in the immediate future and over the next five to ten years?

Enrollment Decline at Community Colleges: It is clear from our visit that community college transfers are a major source of enrollment at Lehman. We were told that the largest feeders are Hostos Community College and Bronx Community College. Across New York, enrollment in public two-year colleges dropped by nearly 30% from Spring 2019 to Spring 2023 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Term Enrollment Estimates," Spring 2023). Enrollments at Hostos Community College and Bronx Community College have experienced similar enrollment declines (CUNY Student Data Book). These trends represent a potential threat to the strong enrollment numbers in the history major. Aggressive recruiting of these students earlier (straight out of high school) has bolstered Lehman's numbers but at the cost of decreasing enrollment at community colleges, so the declining pool of transfers has been exacerbated.

Broader Headwinds for History and the Humanities: A long-term trend away from study of the humanities has resulted in a declining number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities over recent decades (amacad.org Humanities Indicators). Alongside increasingly loud criticism of the value of higher education and humanities study, this represents a challenging context for history programs across the U.S. While the history major at Lehman has done well to avoid this enrollment drop, the program would be well-served by considering more assertive efforts to boost interest in the major.

Viability of MA Program: In contrast to strong undergraduate enrollment numbers, the MA program has struggled to sustain enrollments. The Self-Study reports a decline from 19 to 11 active MA students between 2011 and 2021. This creates a situation in which most coursework for the MA is in shared undergraduate/graduate classes and the handful of graduate-only courses (especially HIS 780) are not sustainable. The possibility of building an online MA program offers one pathway to making the MA program more sustainable, by building enrollments and

allowing the potential for students to combine in-person shared undergraduate/graduate courses with online-only graduate-only classes. At the same time, many members of the department are members of the Graduate Center; this decreases their teaching load while already giving them the opportunity to teach graduate students.

Leadership Transition: One of the strengths identified in the program has been the leadership of Chair Marie Marianetti. However, she has held this position for many years, and it will be necessary to identify new leadership in the next few years.

In what areas is the program weak?

Curricular Assumptions: The curricular assumptions, reflected in the distribution requirements within the major, reflect approaches common among history programs but increasingly out-of-step with current thinking. The categories for students are described in the Self-Study document as including “United States, European History, and World History” (p. 5). An alternate framing of the “World History” category appears as “non-Western civilizations” (p. 7). This is reflected in the expertise of the faculty, which includes 5 U.S. historians, 3 historians of Europe, 1 scholar of the ancient Mediterranean, 1 historian of science, 1 historian of Asia, and 1 specialist in the Middle East. The hiring of a Latin American historian will help with this balance, but it is worth considering how a less traditional imagining of historical fields and their significance might shape the curriculum and the faculty in the future.

Integration of Learning Outcomes with Broader Trends: The history program has aligned its undergraduate learning outcomes with discipline-specific perspectives including four major areas: Citation, Critical Thinking, Information Literacy in Historical Research, and Content Knowledge. While these all have value, they do not fully address Lehman-wide priorities (Lehman’s Institutional Learning Goals) or the career-readiness competencies identified by organizations such as NACE (National Organization of Colleges and Employers). Integrating a more comprehensive and intentional approach to learning outcomes may provide an opportunity to attract students into the major.

Anticipating Student Occupations: Many majors are interested in teaching (K-12). The anticipated wave of K-12 retirements will mean many school districts will be looking for teachers, and quickly. Although there are many professions one can pursue with a History major, the department would do well to actively recruit, and support, future teachers.

Library Resources: Students can become fluent in information literacy only if they have access to resources, and people, in libraries. From databases to books, websites to class trips, students must learn how to navigate and discern reliable information, and have ready access to good sources. Faculty need access to resources as well, if they are to continue their scholarship. Interlibrary loans are helpful, but a well-funded library is essential.

How do the activities of the program contribute to the overall goals and strategic plan of the institution?

Enrollment and graduation: The institutional goal is 90x30. At the departmental level, this requires attention to students, for retention. The role played by the department's undergraduate advisor cannot be overstated. He attends admissions events, quickly replies to students, and helps them feel welcomed in the department, and the college.

Learning Outcomes: As mentioned above, the departmental learning outcomes are not well aligned with the Lehman College Outcomes ([General Education and Institutional Learning Goals - Lehman College](#)). These college-wide outcomes echo national standards, such the NACE competencies, and represent a bridge between academic work and career readiness.

Diversity: The faculty are not diverse. Recent hires may have slightly increased diversity, and a potential new hire in Latin American history may contribute to faculty diversity. By and large, however, students are being taught by faculty who do not look like them. The budgetary limits of salary versus living expenses may offset the benefits of location, which would make positions at Lehman very attractive. In recent hires, administration worked to expand and diversify the applicant pool; that work must continue.

Service: As is typical elsewhere, some members of the department do a lot of service, and others do very little. Serving on campus committees and shared governance, working admissions events and in administrative capacities are all commendable activities. For those who are doing the work, their work is significant; for those who are doing less, their lack of work is noticed by administration.

How do the program's teaching and research foci compare with other similar programs and/or departments at comparable institutions?

The breadth of teaching (coverage) is typical of comparable institutions. Americanists outnumber other parts of the world; this may reflect student interest, but it also limits opportunities to learn more about more parts of the world. The courses, from 100- and 200-level surveys to 300-level more specific courses and 400-level surveys is consistent with offerings in other history programs. Courses reflect the special research interests of faculty, to the benefit of students.

What is the status of the faculty?

Community/Morale: The atmosphere among the faculty is generally healthy. There is a sense of shared purpose and commitment among the full-time faculty. The levels of frustration are not out-of-line with the typical concerns of faculty, and most seem to have a favorable view of the

institution, the program, and the department. One area of concern and anxiety concerns the future of the administrative position in the department. The current administrator is moving to a different unit within Lehman, and faculty are concerned that she may not be replaced with someone capable of doing the job effectively.

There is a significant cohort of part-time faculty who have taught at Lehman for a long time and expressed satisfaction with the conditions of their work. They would appreciate more opportunity for professional development and involvement with the department. As noted above, diversity among the faculty is limited.

Faculty Productivity: As is not unusual, faculty productivity varies, but most faculty members remain active in research. Of eleven faculty members on tenure-line appointments, eight report publications in the last five years (2017 on). There is a large cohort of faculty at the associate professor level (seven of the twelve). Of those seven, only one earned their doctorate in the last twenty years (one did not list the year of their degree). This suggests that the pathway to promotion to professor is not as smooth as it should be, though the reasons are not clear to us.

The Future of the Faculty: In the near term, the main issues appear to be the need to hire a specialist in Latin America (which appears to have administrative support) and the need for a succession plan for departmental leadership. In the medium term, the department will need to think about the next generation of hiring. Five of the eleven tenure-line faculty are thirty years or more from earning their doctorate, which indicates that significant turnover is likely in the next five to ten years. This creates an opportunity to diversify the faculty in terms of demographics and field and to explore new potential areas of focus (e.g. public history).

Lecturers and Faculty Loads: Faculty could not identify their ideal number of majors. With many faculty on reduced loads, in recognition of service elsewhere (campus-wide committees; teaching at the Graduate Center), more and more of the lower-level courses fall to the adjuncts. It is unclear what the department's capacity is for majors; would more faculty and more classes lead to more majors, and more seats? Will the online MA program decrease again the number of courses full-time, tenure-track faculty teach, shifting more introductory courses to adjuncts? For some departments, lecturers have offered stability to the department –the assurance that courses will run – and to the lecturer – a contract for a year or more, rather than semester to semester. We understand the department's reluctance to embrace the lecturer model, but believe it is coming at the cost of growing the major.

What are student perceptions of the program?

Overall Satisfaction: The students with whom we met expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the program. All were engaged and motivated. They came from area community colleges and are taking history classes almost exclusively. They expressed satisfaction with the diversity of the students and did not share any challenges in feeling that they belong at Lehman. The students liked the variety of subjects offered in the history program, including through special topics courses. All the students expressed a strong preference for in-person course delivery.

Advising and Consultation with Faculty: Students expressed satisfaction with the advising structure and their work with Dr. Valentine. They did not report a high level of engagement with faculty outside the classroom, but this did not seem to be a source of concern for the students.

Concern with Writing-Intensive Courses: The students expressed frustration that nearly all of their courses are designated as writing intensive, leading to a heavy load of writing. While all Lehman students need to complete writing-intensive courses, the students' perception is that they end up with significantly more of these courses than required, because the offerings are heavily-weighted to writing-intensive courses. The students were comfortable with the reading assignments, but they feel that the proliferation of writing-intensive courses creates an excessive burden on history majors.