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History Department

Westmont College



Program Goals

Skills

- To be effective historical researchers, graduates must be able to select an appropriate research topic; locate relevant sources; and determine the character of the existing historiography on their topic.
- Graduates should be able to read books and articles by historians with confidence and competence.
- History graduates should know how to read a primary source historically and critically.
- To write a good history paper, graduates must be able to develop an argument; make use of different forms of historical writing; write in an appropriate manner; and provide the requisite scholarly apparatus.

Benchmark

- The department wanted to see at least 75% of the students enrolled in History 198 (12 out of 16) use primary sources that are "reasonably available" in their final project (goal 3).

Assessment Strategies

Category	Superior	Good	Needs help	Really needy
Thesis	25%	38%	25%	12%
Primary sources	32%	32%	32%	6%
Historiography	32%	32%	32%	6%
Logic and argumentation	32%	32%	32%	6%
Writing and mechanics	32%	32%	32%	6%

The department reviewed collectively 16 papers from the HIS 198 seminar in the Fall 2006.

The papers were read according to a grading rubric assessing thesis, use of evidence, secondary literature, structure, logic and argumentation, mechanics.

The rubric was adapted from <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/>

Interpretation of Results

Thesis: Most students did include a thesis. The most common problem had to do with the breadth of the students' claims for a project of 18-30 pages.

Historiography: Most students used a broad set of secondary sources, and many identified a historiographical debate that they addressed in the paper. The faculty recognized different standards for the appropriate use of secondary sources depending on their area of specialty. They also valued the emphasis placed on historiographical competency this semester. The changes implemented as a result of our previous assessment cycle were very effective.

Primary sources: Over 75% of our students included some discussion of primary sources in their paper. However, the level of analysis of these sources was uneven, and in some papers, many of the sources were drawn from secondary literature.

Logic and Argumentation: The best papers were able to develop a clear thesis and sustain a single line of argumentation throughout. However, most students (more than half) struggled either to a) provide evidence that actually supported their thesis, or b) maintain an argumentative as distinct from a purely descriptive tenor throughout their paper.

Mechanics: Students displayed a wide range of abilities, from an excellent command of composition to serious difficulties with the basics of the English language.

Next Steps

Modifications to the grading rubric

Primary sources: the rubric needs to include some criteria to evaluate (1) the level of analysis of the primary sources, (2) our students' ability to use sources other than those drawn from secondary sources, and (3) the appropriateness of the sources used.

Thesis: the rubric needs to include something on the claims made in the thesis, in particular on the breadth of the thesis.

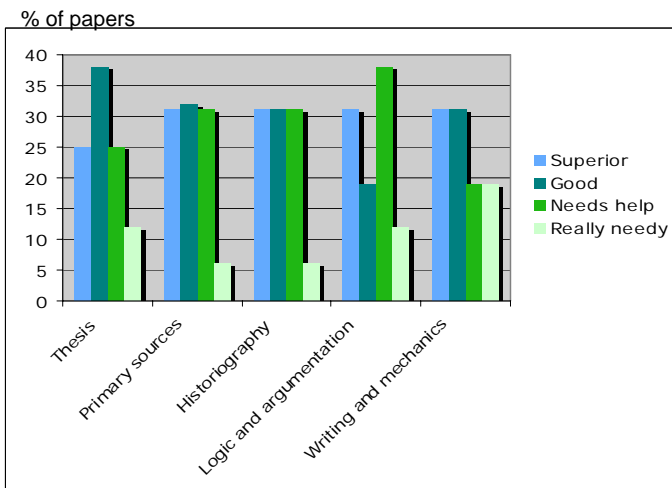
Course-specific strategies

- Make more explicit at the beginning of 198 -in written form- the basic components of a successful 198 paper: Thesis, historiography, evidence grounded in primary sources, and significance. The 198 paper should be conceived not only as a project that allows students to pursue their unique interests, but also one that synthesizes the various skills they have learned throughout their major. Each of the four components of the 198 paper reflect the larger objectives of the major and embody the objectives of our capstone course. By spelling these out, we can do a better job of "trouble shooting" both preemptively and after the submission of first drafts.

- To illustrate the standards, distribute examples of papers to students - along with the grading rubric- to facilitate their understanding of the project.

- Make a list of specific and recurrent difficulties students experience in writing (such as verb tense) and develop specific assignments (such as peer review exercises) to help students improve.

Results



Future Assessment

While continuing to focus on skills, the department would like to turn to the assessment of other goals for the class, namely the effectiveness of the course as a capstone course that integrates the discipline of history and the Liberal Arts. Data has been collected this semester for this purpose.

General issues for the department

Communicate early in the semester about students who have struggled with writing and provide them with a list of strategies and resources on campus.