

Sharper, Clearer Outcomes: Using Stakeholder Focus Groups for Tuning History

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IT IS HARD TO OVERESTIMATE the benefits of effective learning assessments that are founded on clear, measurable *outcomes*.¹ Such outcomes identify what we want our students to know, do, and value as a result of their experiences in our programs. Noted specialist in the field Michael F. Middaugh defines assessment as that process by which we understand and improve the ways students learn as well as enhance the programs and structures that support students' learning. Moreover, "assessment has become an essential tool for demonstrating the ongoing effectiveness of colleges and universities to those public and private sources that fund us."²

Universities and their faculty face increasing pressure for external accountability to accreditors, legislators, the public at large, and, none the least, to our students.³ In response, education specialist Trudy W. Banta recommends that, as the first principle of effective outcomes assessment, members of the faculty consult with the other constituencies that have interest in their program and institution. As Banta writes, "Alumni, employers, and other

community representatives can provide essential insight about the qualities that society needs in future graduates.”⁴ Organizations such as the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment are working to “discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.”⁵ It is imperative for faculty to acknowledge that outcomes assessments are not limited to individual courses, or even to certain disciplinary knowledge or academic skills, but overall to the education of students as whole individuals.

Tuning USA is a nationwide project for fulfilling these goals—and incorporating the discipline of history is one of its first initiatives. In 2011, the American Historical Association (AHA) became the first major disciplinary organization to endorse the Tuning project. At the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), an interdisciplinary team of researchers conducted four focus groups with stakeholders in April and May of 2013 as part of UMKC’s contribution to the AHA’s Tuning Project. Because there is so much skepticism surrounding assessment and Tuning, especially among historians, it is worth looking closely at these examples of stakeholder focus groups to see if this method—and Tuning writ large—provide any valuable insights into what we might wish to change in our undergraduate history programs. To demonstrate its utility, this article will outline the method as well as the insights gained from direct conversations with current students, alumni, and potential employers about our history programs, and changes we initiated in response to our focus group assessments.

Method

Tuning is a well-established process for promoting educational reform and disciplinary synchrony across geographic, institutional, and political boundaries.⁶ In 2011, two Tuning projects were introduced in the United States, both funded by the Lumina Foundation.⁷ A more focused cross-state Tuning project was conducted in psychology and marketing.⁸ The nationwide disciplinary project, “Tuning History,” is one major pedagogical initiative of the AHA.⁹ Perhaps unique among participant institutions, UMKC had

faculty representation on both: a full professor of history and an associate professor of psychology. Along with these disciplinary specialists, our research team also included UMKC's Assistant Vice Provost for Assessment, who provided professional experience in higher education administration. They were further supported by a teaching professor of history and several graduate students from the fields of psychology and higher education. This interdisciplinary research team had a strong foundation in assessment.¹⁰

There are five components to the Tuning process:

- to define the discipline core
- to map career pathways
- to consult stakeholders
- to hone core competencies and learning outcomes, and
- to draft degree specifications.¹¹

These components are not ordered proscriptively. Each university starts the Tuning process at a different place, so it is up to the local faculty to decide for themselves what will be most useful for their Tuning process. The UMKC team, therefore, decided to circumscribe our investigations in three ways:

1. conduct stakeholder focus groups
2. limit the focus groups to students, parents, alumni, and employers
3. focus on student learning outcomes.

The rationales behind these decisions deserve some explanation in that they illustrate how Tuning allows for institutions to make flexible accommodations to local conditions and concerns.

The History Department at UMKC was a campus leader in assessment prior to its involvement in the Tuning process. It already had well-developed core competencies and learning outcomes, as well as instruments and procedures for measuring them, and considerable experience using assessment data to drive curricular improvements. It also seemed logical to allow the disciplinary core to emerge from the national Tuning group and to wait to draft the components relating to degree specification and career mapping after the other Tuning components were in place. So the UMKC team decided at least at this stage to limit our investigation to consulting stakeholders—specifically, parents, students, alumni, and employers.¹²

Second, the Tuning guidelines encouraged local Tuners to solicit feedback on both our specific, measurable student learning outcomes (e.g., contextualize a historical document) and our more general core competencies: those composite skills that students should command upon leaving our programs (e.g., executing a research project). Yet our history department's core competencies were less well developed, and we wished to revise them in response to the input from stakeholders about the outcomes. We, therefore, decided to concentrate our focus groups on the content and language of the current student learning outcomes in use in our department (see **Appendix A**). To that end, the research team developed an extensive questionnaire in August and September 2012 that could be used by both history and psychology. It focused on the learning goals and outcomes that each department set for their undergraduate programs (see **Appendix B**).¹³ Our questionnaire was designed based on the best practices for this methodology, including allowing all people to speak, using open-ended questions, providing the context for questions, and arranging the questions in a logical order that transitioned from general to more specific questions.¹⁴ The goal was to solicit feedback that could both improve the UMKC history program and contribute to a nationwide conversation about history education.

The next step involved identifying stakeholders willing to participate in our focus groups, but here, again, we were forced to reduce the scope of our research. Despite several attempts and inquiries, we were unsuccessful in creating viable databases to contact parents and alumni due to insufficient records and our institution's concerns about privacy under FERPA. We created a list of current history majors and invited a randomly generated, representative sample to participate in our focus groups the first week of December 2012. Interest was so low that the focus group was cancelled. Alternately, instead of a sample, we invited all students within the major to ensure adequate attendance. In the Spring of 2013, we asked specific members of the faculty to offer extra credit to history students who were willing to participate. This procedure created better results with a wider array of the kinds of students who find their way into history courses, not just history majors. Moreover, it attracted some students at the end of their program—in effect providing us with a small set of recent alumni. Similarly challenging was recruiting employers to participate in our focus group. We contacted all of the major archives, museums,

and other institutions of public history in the region, as well as all of the principals of high schools that participate in one of our dual-credit programs. Four of the former responded to our invitations while none of the latter did. Recruiting participants was an ongoing challenge in this project, but our additional efforts proved to be beneficial. Although implementing focus group methods is often difficult, such research can yield valuable and surprising results.¹⁵

To provide the focus groups with a frame of reference for employment, the team solicited information about the actual employment figures of history majors from the Missouri Department of Higher Education in the Fall of 2012. How many were working in what branches of industry? What were average salaries? The Missouri Wage Records (MWR) were of very limited utility. Data since the recession of 2008 seemed atypical to us. Median annual incomes across the board were low (<\$30,000). Moreover, the MWR track only one-half to one-third of UMKC history majors who have found subsequent employment in Missouri. Kansas City, though, stands at the heart of a multi-state region. Our students find employment or pursue graduate study all over the country. If we were to assume that these figures are comparable in other states, then most of our graduates would in fact be employed upon graduation. For our history graduates, the largest single industry is education, followed by half that many in each of the following: Accommodation and Food Services; Administrative, Support, Waste Management and Remediation Services; and Retail Trade. Two of the professions that mattered most to the research team—ongoing graduate education and public history—were invisible in the MWR. This information was updated in the Summer of 2013 for reporting to the AHA's Tuning group, but it did not inform our analysis of the focus groups.

We held four focus groups in April and May 2013. In the first focus group, we met with about a dozen students currently enrolled in an introductory survey course in American History. None of these students were history majors; they took this course solely for the purposes of completing general education requirements. In our experience, they seemed to represent the typical general education student. This course was traditional in format, with two lectures and a discussion section, all held on campus. The instructors used student learning outcomes for assessment, but they did not make them explicit for the students as part of the learning process.

The second group consisted of eight students enrolled in an introductory survey course in Modern World History. Two of them were history majors; there was also a history minor. Others were taking this course because they needed it for other programs, particularly in education. In general, the students in this focus group seemed to be more “historically curious.” This course was one of the first hybrid courses offered by the history department at UMKC, with part of the course online and the other part in class.

The third focus group was with two history majors—one just graduated, one close to the end of her program, and both planning on pursuing an M.A. after earning their Bachelor’s degrees. They were quite enthusiastic about history for its own sake; it is worth mentioning that they are two of our better students. We treated them both as “recent alumni.” These courses from which the second and third focus groups were taken were also different from the first in that the instructors incorporated student learning outcomes as an explicit part of the learning process.

The final focus group included four employers from institutions of public history in the Kansas City region. Two represented institutions of national stature, whereas the other two were more regional in scope. They all have supervisory roles and make employment decisions. One of each institution was an archive and a museum; and one of each was a larger institution and the other smaller. Three of the participants were themselves history majors in college, though they did not attend UMKC. They reported that they would be inclined to hire history majors, given the nature of their institutions.

The focus group meetings lasted about seventy-five minutes each; food was provided. In the first three cases, the history professor welcomed the students on behalf of the department, described the purpose of the meeting and the procedures in place for anonymity, and then left the room so that the students felt free to speak their minds without departmental faculty present. For the first three focus groups with students, the Assistant Vice Provost for Assessment asked the questions and led the discussions, which were observed and transcribed by graduate students or other non-departmental faculty. For the employers’ focus group, the faculty of the history department asked the questions and led the discussions. The questions followed the same standardized questionnaire, and all of the conversations

were recorded digitally and treated anonymously. The graduate student assistants coded and partially transcribed the interviews.

Initially, the disciplinary specialist in history analyzed the evidence drawn from these interviews. Additional suggestions were solicited from all of the members of the investigating team and those employers who were interested in the results. The analysis was then shared with the UMKC Department of History at our annual retreat in August 2013, where it served as the basis for discussions on pedagogy and assessment procedures.¹⁶ In analyzing our transcripts and notes from the focus groups, several significant themes emerged: the data revealed information on the way students develop intellectually as well as develop a shared interest among all the stakeholders in more and earlier attention to research and analysis, interpersonal engagement, people skills, practical experience, and putting all of these individual skills together into synthetic historical competencies that are “ready-to-go” for the first day on the job. The example from UMKC thus demonstrates the utility of asking stakeholders for open and honest feedback on student learning outcomes inasmuch as we discovered, in the process, a remarkable degree of shared interests.

Patterns of Development

It was not an intentional part of our research design to move through the four focus groups in a roughly sequential order, much in the way that a student might move through a career. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the evidence from the focus groups, though limited in many ways, closely reflected one of the developmental trajectories experienced by college students: that of “reflective judgment,” where students move from dualistic thinking—as if there were clear categories of truth/fiction and right/wrong—to relativism, and then to using evidence to take interpretive positions in scholarly debates.¹⁷ The focus groups also hinted at differences between students who are exposed to the outcomes in the course or program and students who are not. The focus groups thus highlighted challenges we face as instructors of history when trying to attract students to our major, for recruitment sometimes happens just at the moment when they are struggling with these developmental challenges.

The typical general education students are far less invested in their history courses compared to history majors or students who

need history courses for other programs. These largely disinterested students feel that their history courses are boring and require too much reading. Most do not see a direct connection of our learning outcomes to their careers—none of which, in the case of the first focus group, was history related. At most, some see a small benefit in learning how to write better. They do not see any relevance of history to their specific majors or to their lives beyond having interesting banter to offer at parties. They do not know what they could do with a history degree after graduation. They report hearing that there is not much that one can do with a history degree in Kansas City in particular—a distressing myth given the wealth of historical institutions in the area. They complain that their teaching assistants were arbitrary, inaccessible, and unresponsive. Several students express doubts that they would ever take another history course. If they like their history courses at all, the typical student feels that it was due to the passion of the lead instructors for history and less for the subject itself.

A somewhat better picture emerges from the history-interested students. They see the benefits of history for an educated person in general, but they are still largely focused on completing individual courses. They are somewhat better able to explain the benefits of our student learning outcomes. They are aware of the need for contextualization and making arguments about causation. They see the relevance of history to their lives as citizens and in their careers if they are planning to become teachers. But they rely on trite phrases for why and how history is relevant, like “those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it.” That is, they are not able to make as many links as we would like between the skills they are learning in our survey courses and their larger careers at UMKC or beyond.

The responses from the history majors, by contrast, demonstrate that they are able to think critically about their whole program and what is needed for success in and after it. History majors emphasize the benefits of a history major as a way to learn how to write and conduct research. In comparison to their English courses, history majors argue that they learn more about writing, researching, and constructing arguments in their history courses. In some history courses, they analyze each line of an argument together with their professors; they reported that this kind of close mentoring about writing does not happen in English courses. The fact that professors invest so much time in line-by-line readings of their papers means

a lot to them and was very instructive. Some of these courses were “painful,” but they got a lot out of them. At the same time, they feel that they could use more practice in composition, as it is still a struggle for them.

History majors are better able to express their love of history, providing examples of why they are relevant to people today. History majors can explain the value of a history education for their careers and of history for an informed citizenry. They are able to express this “value added” by a history degree eloquently in conversation with others. History majors are also able to specifically address the skills they have acquired in the UMKC history program. They refer directly to their acquired skills at developing a research agenda, conducting research, analyzing causation, synthesizing information from multiple sources, and organizing one’s ideas into presentations. They understand the way that these skills work together as a whole.

A similar development took place in terms of the presumed purpose of studying the past. The disinterested general education students at least feel that, in their introductory survey, they were now getting “the truth” as compared to the inaccurate information that they received from other sources—perhaps high school or the media. Some even recognize that they are learning multiple sides of the debates. History-interested students similarly emphasize their desire for “the truth” about the past rather than “subjective opinions” or “relative” answers. At the same time, they are critical of “regurgitation class[es]” focusing solely on historical facts. By contrast, history majors emphasize their appreciation for the complexity of historical knowledge. They see the benefits of interdisciplinarity for their understanding of history. They are convinced of the necessity for a broad understanding of the context for texts and events in order to explain them. They are able to speak eloquently about these topics. Here, we see clear evidence of the development of reflective judgment.

Most of the students and employers believe that all of our current student outcomes are useful in principle. Typical general education students are frustrated by the fact that history writing is different from English writing and that it is hard to master. They also do not find the Writing Studio, UMKC’s peer consultation center, to be particularly helpful in improving their skills. They feel that our history courses are like “Composition 2 courses.” They do not have much to say

about the learning outcomes per se—appropriately so, since that particular instructor did not directly address them in the classroom.

By contrast, the particular group of history-interested students was exposed to the learning outcomes in the everyday language of their survey course. Not surprisingly, they recognize that assessment-driven assignments help them to learn how to “explain history better.” They see the learning outcomes as “a how-to guide for writing a paper.” Some feel that all of the six outcomes were important; others, notably, raised the concern that instructors are “focusing solely on teaching to objectives” rather than on the history itself. That is, some students still wished for content-driven courses, did not like the language of assessment, or both.

In comparison to the other students, advanced students better understand the importance of learning how to write, analyze, and engage in critical thinking. History majors appreciate all six student learning outcomes. They feel that they are all necessary parts of historical scholarship and that they are closely related to one another. One admitted to being “a television snob” after becoming a history major, as she no longer views the History Channel as good history. This comment suggests that students develop a better appreciation for the fundamental skills (required to be a historian) that they gradually acquire over the course of their studies. Our majors are thus fairly well prepared for a job interview in which they have to explain what it is that they bring to the table as history majors. They feel a greater sense of confidence as budding historians in part because, in their terms, the program demystified the process by which history is written.

Still, most of the students in the focus groups lacked a clear sense of the options for what they might do with a history degree. Even the history majors felt that there are fewer options available to them than, say, an engineer, when in fact the opposite is the case, particularly in the Kansas City region. Public history appeals to them as it seems to have direct applications for their careers in the future. Significantly, employers agree that all of the existing outcomes are important. Moreover, they believe that our students should be able to share those talents clearly and eloquently with potential employers if they wish to get hired in a competitive environment.

Conducting these focus groups has revealed a number of areas in which we are succeeding with our history majors; but it has

also disclosed at least two kinds of frustration with our existing program learning outcomes. Some members of the faculty disagree, sometimes strongly, that there are tangible benefits in addressing outcomes explicitly with the students in the learning process, in collecting data on them, or even to focus on skills building. Some of the variability in student responses derives from the differences in instructional practices in the department. If faculty members do not explain the relevance of learning outcomes to students, then students do not know that those are the goals of the course or the program. More than anything else, however, the variability in student responses seems to reflect different stages in their academic careers. Initially, they seem to be primarily interested in history as content, if at all. Only later do they come to appreciate that all of the outcomes are in fact necessary for their success. Many of them seem to experience considerable frustration and reluctance in adjusting their thinking about history over the course of their careers.

These focus groups thus revealed an unfortunate coincidence in the timing of our teaching and their learning. On the one hand, the challenges of intellectual development are part and parcel of the college experience. On the other, this trajectory poses problems for recruitment and retention in the history program. We often recruit history majors from our general education courses. We try to retain them in our program while they are struggling to adjust to this new way of thinking and behaving. To put it bluntly, history instructors want them to become majors at the same time that we are trying to get them to rethink many of their assumptions about the world. Just as we want them to see us as their mentors, we are asking them to challenge their assumptions about authoritative truths. For some students, our role in challenging their assumptions may very well be the main reasons they become our majors. But for others, we may lose some prospective majors precisely because of the timing of this decision. There is scant literature—just one brief article—that examines why students become history majors, but more general studies on major choice suggest that students who report they have strong interests in a specific discipline might be more likely to major in it if they were provided clear and convincing information about career pathways and options in the discipline.¹⁸ Thus, historians might develop better strategies for describing career pathways for history majors, a central task of Tuning. We should also ask: are

there mechanisms, whether advisory, curricular, co-curricular, and otherwise, that we could introduce into the middle of our history programs—that is, in the second or early third year—that could help us to help them make this crucial transition more successfully?

Research and Analysis Skills

The focus groups also elicited informative comments and specific suggestions about some of our learning outcomes. Some were technical clarifications in our language. Employers did not understand the “his/her” part of the description for “contextualization.” It read:

The student relates the events in his/her particular story to the general history of the topic; and the student relates his/her interpretation to the interpretations of other historians, or to theorists or scholars in other disciplines.

The employers felt that this description made it seem like the students were supposed to apply their *own* biographies to the subject. They suggested revising it to clarify that we are asking them to frame the texts in the history they are telling in the appropriate context, not their personal story. Making this revision fits with the goals of Tuning—to create program outcomes that make sense not only to scholars but also to employers.

More significantly, there was a notable interest among all participants in the closely related skills of research, synthesis, and evaluation. Of the six student learning outcomes, research stood out as the one that attracted the most comments by our students. It seems to be something that both attracts them and is a cause for concern. General education students like problem-centered assignments. By contrast, history-interested students do not feel that they were learning how to do research in their general education courses, in the sense of identifying sources for themselves or comparing multiple viewpoints. In this limited sense, the term “research” made less sense to them as a learning outcome.

Yet history majors, who took more advanced courses where these skills were more fully developed, see the benefit of a program where students are encouraged to look at evidence and draw their own conclusions rather than simply reiterate the arguments presented to them by their professors. History majors understand far better the scope and nature of historical research, but still desire more practice

with basic skills, such as reference systems, databases, locating primary and secondary sources on particular areas of interest, and constructing arguments of their own based on sources. They suggest emphasizing these technical skills “from the beginning” instead of assuming that they already know how to do so. They also complain that the UMKC history department does not have a uniform system for footnotes for all papers in our program.

Employers have strong opinions about research and analysis. They expect their employees to be able to footnote and conduct research. They are explicit, however, about not needing B.A. students to have advanced technical training in archival methods because each institution has its own rules and foci. They train them in those capacities on the job. Employers insist, by contrast, that a B.A. student should be more advanced within Bloom’s taxonomy in terms of synthesis and evaluation; they need B.A. students to be more sophisticated than simply having a “rudimentary” proficiency with synthesis and evaluation.

Employers also have strong opinions about originality of research, analysis, and synthesis—an implicit condition for meeting the other learning outcomes that are embedded in the language of our program descriptions. While these outcomes are central to academic achievement, these employers do not have high regard for them. In fact, they suggest that a commitment to one’s own interpretation sometimes *interferes* with one’s job performance as an archivist or a museum curator, which they defined as making resources and exhibitions available to users and visitors, and to anticipate the kinds of research and exhibitions that will be demanded in the future. Moreover, they insist that a specialist’s interest in one specific topic does not work well at an institution where one must be a generalist—or when one switches jobs to a different institution with a different focus.

On the one hand, then, the focus groups revealed a need for more attention to research skills earlier in the program. They suggest that the more research skills students develop, the more they seem to recognize their need to learn more. Whereas this feeling is healthy for scholars, it seems to produce anxiety for our students and may become a stumbling block for some in making their way into our program or making progress toward graduation. Some of these issues can be addressed with relative ease—for instance, by changes

in language or assigning a department-specific reference system such as Author-Date, Chicago, MLA, Turabian, or one developed locally. Others seem to require more careful curricular innovation, like introducing skills of research, both technical and analytic, earlier in the curriculum in a more systematic way.

On the other hand, too great an identification with research skills or limiting interests to specific fields of history may hinder their chances for employment after they leave our programs—at least for those students not pursuing an academic future. Attending to this population seems to require sensitizing students, and faculty, to the realities of employment outside the professoriate after they graduate. If they were made aware of the demands on their skills in the working world while still in the program, they may opt, or could be encouraged, to expand the definition of what it means to study history as an undergraduate. Here, again, we might consider introducing new forms of coursework and advising that focus on practical skill development and real-world applications in order to address what might be a structural weakness in our programs—at least for those students who are not pursuing an academic career.

People Skills

A similar story could be told about the feedback we received regarding a set of competencies that might be grouped together as “people skills.” At all levels, students and employers want to see more interaction in our curriculum. General education students want more group projects, more application, more engagement, more time for questions, and more face-to-face connections with instructors. They complain that there is too much filler information that is not directly relevant to the assessment tools. They want to see more integration between the material in the lectures and the discussions in the breakout sections as well as prioritizing understanding over informational content. They also want more opportunities to revise their work and learn how to improve it.

History-interested students similarly wish for more time to interact with professors and fellow students. They recommend both more peer-review activities within individual courses as well as more co-curricular and social activities outside of coursework for students with common interests. They complain about the lack of community

in comparison to other programs. Perhaps this lack is due to the fact that there are many transfer students at UMKC or because students do not engage with others if they are not interested in the same focus within history. They insist that they respond positively to instructors who are passionate about their subject and give positive feedback to their students when they participate in class. The same goes for public speaking, though the recognition for the need for this skill seems to come later. History majors wish for more opportunities to learn and practice public speaking both in general and about history. They add that this kind of public speaking should not be less scholarly, but rather help them make their scholarship relevant to the public.

These same points are some of the main suggestions to come from employers. Employers want people skills. They want to see more emphasis on teamwork in our learning outcomes. They repeatedly emphasize the need for history majors employed at their institutions to be confident and eloquent while making presentations to co-workers and the public. They insist that they have no use for bookish types who cannot interact with others. They need people who can communicate and interact with visitors, users, co-workers, and donors, of collections or objects as well as money. They even imply that this skill set would give an advantage to UMKC students, even over students from more competitive programs, because those students tend to be even more bookish and less comfortable with human interaction.

It seems particularly significant that students at different stages in our program, as well as employers, share this interest in more interpersonal engagement. This issue is a bit of a problem for the faculty at UMKC—and no doubt for many other public, urban universities—since many of our students seem particularly reluctant to speak in class or to come to social activities outside of class. Perhaps our mistake here has been to misinterpret their reluctance to engage with their peers, their instructors, or the public with a lack of interest in or need for learning these skills. The focus groups suggest that they very much want to have more engagement with others and to learn those crucial people skills that will enable them to succeed in many kinds of jobs after graduation. It is apparent that we need to do a better job of breaking down the myths that surround the profession of history, as if we are happiest papering through dusty

archives rather than interacting with other people. Here, again, it may behoove us to consider ways to change our curriculum, advising, and co-curricular activities to increase the value we place on people skills as a central component of good historical scholarship and teaching. Importantly, we were able to see this point of consensus among employers, students, and faculty by holding these focus groups and asking stakeholders for their opinions outside of the usual professional relationships between mentors and students, researchers and archivists, or scholars and curators.

Other Suggestions

Our students made a number of other practical suggestions with regards to our curriculum at UMKC. These comments may or may not be applicable to other programs. Nonetheless, we include them here in order to illustrate the ways in which this component of Tuning has helped us to identify possible areas for curricular improvement and innovation.

Some of these comments seemed rather idiosyncratic; it is hard to tell here how representative they are. One education student wants more instruction in historical pedagogy within the history program. History-interested students do not see the purpose of general education courses or a foreign language for the pursuit of a history degree, while others see general education as a way to become a more “complete person.” By contrast, the history majors wish they had taken more foreign languages in their general education or elective courses in order to better prepare themselves for study in history—including American history. They understand that it probably cannot be a requirement, but should be strongly recommended for all majors in the sense that “you would get more out of this major if you had some foreign language skills.” History majors also feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading in the program and encourage us to teach or require speed reading.

A more interesting set of results concerned the difference between pragmatic skills and what might be called attributes of “character.” Overall, students tend to emphasize technical and very pragmatic skills as the benefits of a history major, treating each skill (like “historical analysis”) in relative isolation. By contrast, employers tend to see the benefits of a history major in terms of more abstract

qualities such as curiosity, confidence, tenaciousness, flexibility, and enthusiasm. They want to see from their employees a love for the craft of history in its own right—to avoid the danger of getting burned out too fast on the job—as well as sensitivity for details, such as proper footnoting and correct facts! Here, they emphasize again the need for generalists rather than specialists. They need employees with a broad base of factual knowledge and the ability to find many historical periods and topics interesting. In a similar vein, they look for people who can identify what is missing or needs attention in a project, who can adapt to the needs and foci of the institution, and who can evaluate the credibility of different kinds of sources in an information age (such as Facebook posts).

To be sure, they also seek technical skills like fluency with non-specialist computer software—such as Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Illustrator, but excluding GIS or SPSS—as well as social media as a resource of institutions of public history to communicate with the public. But as these skills can be learned on the job, their real emphasis lies elsewhere. They hope for employees who can synthesize, who can tell a good story, who can convey that enthusiasm for the material to the public even if they are not personally interested in the topic—a.k.a. “faking it”—and yet do all of that while writing concisely and precisely.

Here, they tend to emphasize the need for extensive practical experiences as a way to acquire many of these less tangible qualities as a marketable employee. They suggest experience conducting research in brick-and-mortar archives rather than just digital repositories, or working in an archive or museum as an intern. They emphasize the need for these internships to expose majors to the full range of tasks—recognizing that not all of the tasks are fun or glamorous. After all, a lot of archival work involves removing staples and cataloguing. Perhaps most interesting, they emphasize the need for holistic and integrated competencies, such as the ability to apply all of these skills in a coherent and responsible manner to actual exhibitions, collections, and the like.¹⁹

It was somewhat reassuring to the team that our history majors at UMKC have developed sufficient self-awareness of the work they need to do on their basic skills. It suggests another well-recognized pattern of intellectual development over the course of a college career—that introductory students know less and yet are

more confident, while advanced students know more and yet see much more clearly all that they still have to learn. That humility could also encourage them to increase their effort at developing the skills they need for the working world. That said, the focus groups with stakeholders clearly revealed that employers want to hire people who already have the confidence and ability to accomplish complex, synthetic tasks. They require not just individual skills, but experienced competencies, so that our majors can “hit the ground running” as their employees. It is worth asking ourselves if there are ways for us to build these synthetic competencies into our curriculum from an earlier stage in students’ development so that we can better prepare them for their careers. Here, again, it seems that the focus groups revealed a number of areas in which all of the stakeholders actually agree, at least in principle. Finding ways to address these needs is now the next step.

Conclusion

The history faculty at UMKC has a long tradition of tinkering with its curriculum in the search for solutions to some of these problems. For instance, we have greatly altered our general education survey courses in order to provide students more interaction with instructors and redesigned our capstone sequence to provide them with more opportunities for peer support, interaction, and public presentation. We also have experimented with a mid-degree²⁰ group research project in which students work together to produce a historical exhibition using local historical resources. This course presumes no background historical knowledge and requires that students work together to develop an exhibition of joint and popular interest. For those who take this optional course, it serves as a bridge from general education into the major, and from the introductory survey to upper-division courses, at a crucial moment in their intellectual development. It not only exposes students to research skills earlier in their degree program, but also brings students into contact with the general public, as well as professionals, in the archive and museum world. In the process, they experience firsthand the need for collegiality, excellent communication, and the ability to collaborate, in addition to the need for leadership, personal initiative, intellectual flexibility, and professional courtesy. Students feel much more

prepared for their capstone projects after completing this analogous group project. We might very well ask them in a few years, as alumni, whether they feel that these kinds of courses better prepared them for the “real world” as historians, teachers, museum curators, or in any other aspects of their professional and civic lives.

More immediately, the history faculty discussed the results of these focus groups at our annual departmental retreat. The faculty quickly expressed support for many of the changes listed above, such as providing students with a standard citation guide and emphasizing the techniques of research and analysis from early in their intellectual careers at UMKC. Requiring internships would also correspond to some initiatives in our new general education program towards high-impact learning experiences such as service learning and research collaborations as well as complementing the new track in our degree program in public history. The faculty also responded positively to requiring some kind of group project early in their major where collaborative assignments can teach interpersonal and public speaking skills integrated within the rest of our student learning outcomes. Several faculty members immediately volunteered interesting topics that could catch student interest and public attention; others suggested new media options as ways to “publish” the results. Such curricular changes may contribute to graduating history majors from UMKC whose interest and talents in history are more broad and flexible, making them more viable job candidates. It is also consistent with the long-term trend in our history degree programs away from a more content-driven curriculum and towards a more competencies-driven one. How these changes will be implemented and whether they will have the anticipated results are no doubt matters that will require more Tuning in the future.

UMKC may be unique in many ways, but its example is illustrative of the utility of Tuning. It is helping historians across the country to develop sharper, clearer outcomes, better suited to their particular institutions and regions, as well as curricula and practices that will better prepare their students for future opportunities. Trudy W. Banta, Elizabeth A. Jones and Karen E. Black argue that “one of the tenets of good research has always been that results should be communicated and vetted so that the research can benefit others as they pursue similar studies.”²¹ At UMKC, our internal assessments

have helped us identify students' strengths and weaknesses, just as our stakeholder focus groups have helped us discover patterns in the intellectual development of our students and shared interests between stakeholders that were hard to see when embedded within our regular relationships as students and mentors, researchers and archivists, scholars and curators. These insights are already being translated into specific action plans at UMKC. As Barbara E. Walvoord contends, strong assessments "can provide a basis for wiser planning, budgeting, and change in curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, programming, and student support."²² By consulting with multiple stakeholders in a national Tuning process, we are working to build an undergraduate experience for our history students here in Kansas City, and around the country, that maximizes their learning and development, and helps professional historians to better communicate the "value added" of a history degree to the public at large.

Notes

1. The terms "objectives" and "outcomes" are largely interchangeable in the literature. The UMKC history department uses the former, but the research team preferred the latter.

2. Michael F. Middaugh, *Planning and Assessment in Higher Education: Demonstrating Institutional Effectiveness* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), x.

3. Dana S. Dunn, Maureen A. McCarthy, Suzanne C. Baker, and Jane S. Halonen, *Using Quality Benchmarks for Assessing and Developing Undergraduate Programs* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Jeremy D. Penn, ed., *Assessing Complex General Education Student Learning Outcomes: New Directions for Institutional Research, No. 149* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*, second ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2009); Barbara E. Walvoord, *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*, second ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

4. Trudy W. Banta and Associates, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 266.

5. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, "Our Mission and Vision," par. 1, <<http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/AboutUs.html>>.

6. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, <<http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu>>; Institute for Evidence-Based Change, Tuning Educational Structures

USA, <<http://www.tuningusa.org/About.aspx>>; Tuning América Latina, <<http://www.tuningal.org/en>>.

7. Lumina Foundation, <<http://www.luminafoundation.org>>.

8. Midwestern Higher Education Compact, “Tuning,” <<http://www.mhec.org/programs/tuning>>.

9. American Historical Association, “Tuning,” <<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning>>.

10. All three of the primary investigators represented UMKC at the Higher Learning Commission’s (HLC) Assessment Academy. Their other credentials include serving as peer reviewers for the HLC and consulting or being hired to develop assessment at other universities. The two disciplinary specialists had additionally served as faculty mentors through UMKC’s Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching (FaCET). In this capacity, they helped peers in many different disciplines to develop assessment procedures.

11. IEBC, Tuning USA, “The Components of Tuning,” <<http://tuningusa.org/About/The-Five-Components-of-Tuning.aspx>>.

12. The UMKC history faculty had already engaged in extensive discussions about its own student learning outcomes internally through a series of rounds of pilot testing and revision. In August 2012, they also shared their outcomes with colleagues at other institutions involved in Tuning History. More feedback will follow from the tuning process in 2013-2014 as participants share their results with one another.

13. In September 2012, this institutional research project was submitted to the Social Science Institutional Review Board. In October, the SSIRB determined that this project did not constitute human subjects research as defined by the statutes and thus did not require SSIRB review.

14. Donna M. Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*, second ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005); Deepak Prem Subramony, Nathan Lindsay, Rebecca H. Middlebrook, and Chuck Fosse, “Using Focus Group Interviews,” *Performance Improvement* 41, no. 8 (September 2002): 38-45.

15. Sharon Vaughan, Jeanne Shay Schumm, and Jane M. Sinagub, *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

16. The resulting revisions to our outcomes, goals, rubrics, and curriculum were not yet formulated at the time of this publication.

17. Patricia M. King and Karen Strohm Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

18. The only study that addresses students’ “history interest” and its effect on their selection of college major suggests that institutions need to do a better job of demonstrating the “value” of history to students’ intended careers. See Yongjun Dan and William Lan, “Measurement and Comparison of College Students’ History Interests,” *College Student Journal* 44, no. 2 (June 2010): 424-432. See also Jeri Mullins Beggs, John H. Bantham, and Steven Taylor, “Distinguishing the Factors

Influencing College Students' Choice of Majors," *College Student Journal* 42, no. 2 (June 2008); David M. S. Kimweli, Allan G. Richards, "Choice of a Major and Students' Appreciation of their Major," *College Student Journal* 33, no. 1 (March 1999): 16-27.

19. A majority of college graduates report having held at least one internship; during the recession, having an internship was "more or less a prerequisite for a job," according to Dan Barrett, "Internships Offer Tickets to Jobs and Lessons in Unpredictability," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 8, 2013, pp. A29-30; Yvette Alex-Assensoh and Mary Ryan, "Value-Added Learning," *Peer Review* 10, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2008): 34-36; Patricia R. Olsen, "A Future in Directing Online Traffic," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2009, p. 10.

20. For technical reasons having to do with our general education curriculum, this bridging course from the surveys to the major had to be listed as an upper-division course, so we placed it at the beginning of the third year.

21. Tracy W. Banta, Elizabeth A. Jones and Karen E. Black, *Designing Effective Assessment: Principles and Profiles of Good Practice* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), p. 18.

22. Walvoord, *Clear and Simple*, 6.

Appendix A

Tuning AHA

UMKC History Department Student and Employer Focus Groups, April/May 2014

Student Learning Objectives

We measure our B.A. and M.A. students according to the same rubric, although M.A. students are expected to perform at a higher level of sophistication in terms of the scope, scale, and depth of the work. Students graduating from the history program with a B.A. or M.A. should be able to demonstrate the following competencies:

O 1: Evidence of Knowledge of the Past

The student recognizes, demonstrates, and applies appropriate knowledge of the world's civilizations and peoples as well as their political, economic, social, and cultural histories.

O 2: Evidence of Contextualization

The student relates the events in his/her particular story to the general history of the topic; and the student relates his/her interpretation to the interpretations of other historians, or to theorists or scholars in other disciplines.

Sub-Objectives:

- 2.1 *Historical Context*: The student explains the historical context and relates his/her evidence to it.
- 2.2 *Historiographical Context*: The student explains the historiographical context and relates his/her historical interpretation to it.
- 2.3 *Theoretical Context*: The student explains one or more theoretical paradigm/s and relates his/her evidence to it/them.
- 2.4 *Interdisciplinary Context*: The student integrates tools from other disciplines into his/her historical analysis.

O 3: Evidence of Research

The student demonstrates the ability to identify and employ primary and/or secondary sources to research a topic exhaustively.

Sub-Objectives:

- 3.1 *Evidence of Primary-Source Research*: The student identifies and employs primary sources to research a topic exhaustively.
- 3.2 *Evidence of Secondary-Source Research*: The student identifies and employs secondary sources to research a topic exhaustively.

O 4: Evidence of Analysis

The student is able to use primary and secondary sources to construct an original historical interpretation, demonstrating competency in identifying a problem, posing a hypothesis, proposing a methodology, offering an interpretation, and providing a synthesis.

Sub-Objectives:

- 4.1 *Identify a Problem*: The student identifies a question in our current understanding of the past that needs an alternative answer.
- 4.2 *Poses a Hypothesis*: The student formulates and introduces a hypothesis.
- 4.3 *Proposes a Methodology*: The student explains and applies a historical methodology for investigating the sources and critically evaluates them in terms of bias and reliability.
- 4.4 *Engages the Data*: The student uses evidence to analyze the past within the body of the work.

O 5: Evidence of Communication

The student is able to compose and present clear, well-organized, properly documented, grammatical prose.

Sub-Objectives:

- 5.1 *Organization*: The student organizes the composition well and according to professional expectations so that the message of the historical work is clearly, concisely, and precisely communicated.

- 5.2 *Proper Documentation*: The student documents the composition properly and according to professional expectations so that the provenance of the primary and secondary sources is clearly communicated.
- 5.3 *Grammar*: The student uses grammatical prose so that the information of the historical work is clearly communicated.

O 6: Evidence of Synthesis & Evaluation*

The student is able to critically appraise alternative readings of the past, create a coherent historical interpretation, and take a critical position in these debates.

Sub-Objectives:

- 6.1 *Engages in Criticism*: The student is able to critically appraise alternative interpretations and approaches to the subject.
- 6.2 *Offers an Interpretation*: The student is able to build upon his/her knowledge, research, contextualization, and analysis to create a coherent historical account.
- 6.3 *Forms a Conclusion*: The student is able to formulate and defend an informed conclusion, taking a critical stance supported by evidence and argument.

** B.A. students are expected to have a rudimentary competency in this area; it is far more of an expectation of M.A. students.*

Appendix B

Tuning History & Psychology: Questionnaires for Focus Groups at UMKC in 2012-2013

*University of Missouri-Kansas City
September 2012, revised April 2013*

Questionnaire 2: Current Majors and Students in History Classes

Prologue:

Welcome
Introduce Host & Observer
Thanks: Department, UMKC
Introduce Yourself
Tuning: Component 3, Feedback from Stakeholders
Anonymity

Your Experiences with Program:

1. What words or phrases come to mind when you think about history/psychology majors?
2. Why did you become a history/psychology major, or why are you taking history courses?
3. What kinds of knowledge or skills did you hope to attain as a history/psychology major, or by taking history courses?
4. What kinds of knowledge or skills do you wish the history/psychology degree or courses was providing?
5. What prior knowledge and skills would have enhanced your learning as a history/psychology major, or as a student in history courses?

Distribute Competencies & Outcomes:

These are the specific learning outcomes we try to meet in our curriculum. (Wait).

6. Is there any language in this document that I can clarify for you?

Thoughts on Program Experience:

7. Which of these learning outcomes, if any, did you learn in the history/psychology program, or in history courses?
8. What kinds of courses, assignments, or experiences helped you the most in acquiring these competencies?
9. Which, if any, of these learning outcomes have you not acquired? Why?
10. Which learning outcomes do you think are less or not important? Why?
11. Are there any important learning outcomes missing from this list?
12. Are there any type of major projects or experiences you would like to have by the time you graduate (e.g., internship, independent research paper, study abroad, others)?

Thoughts on the Future:

13. What are your career plans after you graduate?
14. Which learning outcomes do you think will help you in your career plans? In what ways?
15. Which learning outcomes are not important for your career plans? Why?
16. Is there something we are not teaching that you think will be important?
17. Is there anything you would change in these documents, either in content or language?
18. Overall, what feedback would you provide to help us strengthen our program?

Epilogue:

Thanks: Department, UMKC, Tuning
Turn off Recorder
Answer Questions

Questionnaire 4: Employers

Prologue:

Welcome
 Introduce Host & Observer
 Thanks: Department, UMKC
 Introduce Yourselves
 Tuning: Component 3, Feedback from Stakeholders
 Anonymity

Your Experiences with our Majors:

1. Do you hire history/psychology majors?
2. When you think of potential employees with a history/psychology degree, what words or phrases come to mind?
3. Is having a history/psychology degree an important factor of your hiring considerations?
4. What kinds of knowledge or skills are you seeking in your employees?
5. What knowledge or skills have history/psychology majors brought to your organization?
6. What knowledge or skills do you wish they had brought?
7. What could university history/psychology programs do to better prepare our students to work at your organization?
8. Share any experiences you've had with a history/psychology major employees.

Distribute Competencies & Outcomes:

And these are the specific learning outcomes we try to meet in our curriculum.

(Wait).

9. Is there any language in this document that I can clarify for you?

Feedback on Competencies & Outcomes:

10. Which of these learning outcomes, if any, has helped you, or could help you, in your organization? Describe how.
11. Which of these learning outcomes are less or not important? Why?
12. Are there any learning outcomes missing on this list?
13. Is there anything you would change in these documents, either in content or language?
14. Overall, what feedback would you provide to help us strengthen our history/psychology program?

Epilogue:

Thanks: Department, UMKC, Tuning
 Turn off Recorder
 Answer Questions