

The American Historical Association's Tuning Project: An Introduction

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WHEN STUDENTS COMPLETE A MAJOR, what should they know, understand, and be able to do?

This simple, straightforward, and sensible question rests at the heart of “Tuning,” a project in higher education that began in Europe in 2000 and has since spread to nations and regions around the world. Participants clarify the content students must know and the skills they must develop in a field of study in order to move successfully toward a degree and on to further education, careers, and civic life. Tuning’s focus rests on the quality and outcomes of the learning that take place in higher education. Wherever Tuning occurs, specialists in a discipline have an opportunity to frame a common language about their field, outline shared objectives, and discuss mutual concerns about the understanding and skills students develop in their studies. There is a “process” tied to Tuning. The project contains many steps. There are multiple meetings, consultations, and groups involved in the work. There is a body of information, data, and “metrics” to collect. Tuning takes place at multiple stages. But it keeps coming back to its informing question: what knowledge and skills do faculty discipline experts believe their students should

develop within a program of study? The inquiry brings us back to the heart and soul of our work, to a focus on learners and learning.

Dr. Anne Hyde of the University of Oklahoma has framed Tuning in this broad and reflective manner. Put aside, she argues, the procedures of academic reform, the vocabulary of new initiatives, and the “manuals” for institutional change. Hyde suggests that Tuning comes down to a basic conversation in a field of study, a discussion that scholars start by talking about the “disciplinary ideals [that] link us as historians and how we might best introduce those to our students.”¹ Share thoughts on this issue, and Tuning has begun.

Another opening into Tuning emphasizes the complex—and urgent—issues educators face across higher education. Dr. Gabrielle M. Spiegel of Johns Hopkins University, a former president of the American Historical Association, outlined the problem in a discerning 2008 essay. Her discussion of “A Triple ‘A’ Threat: Accountability, Assessment, Accreditation” raised a “caution that if we don’t craft the instruments of assessment, then the state or federal government surely will.”² Historians should be pro-active in defining their field of study, its core principles, and its profound value. If discipline experts step away from the task, those with no understanding of our field will do the job for us.

We can understand Tuning as an extension of an amicable, collegial conversation or as a response to high-stakes, external demands. Either way, the project helps historians take the lead in clarifying the work and contributions of our discipline and, as the accompanying articles demonstrate, respond in appropriate and meaningful ways to a wide variety of pressing concerns on campuses across the nation.

Brief Background

The economic integration of European nations undertaken since the 1950s was accompanied, in 1999, by an educational initiative, the “Bologna Process,” that also aimed at greater continental unity. The project aimed to break down walls that divided European universities and rethink their approach to higher education: creating a European Higher Education Area; outlining comparable degree programs; drafting guidelines for quality assurance; facilitating student mobility and transfer; and connecting higher education to democratic principles, economic development, equitable participation, and

lifelong learning.³ Universities responded to the Bologna Process in 2000 with “Tuning,” a process that focused on designing, operating, and evaluating degree programs aligned with Bologna objectives.⁴

When European colleagues talk about the project, they identify a guiding principle: “Tuning of educational structures and programmes on the basis of diversity and autonomy.”⁵ In other words, the Tuning process focuses on identifying points of reference, convergence, and common understanding about the competencies and learning outcomes of different study areas. Tuning also seeks to develop reference points for common curricula at different degree levels. Its goal is to create *connections* among higher education institutions, not uniformity.

Tuning began with a handful of disciplines; now it covers over seventy-four subject areas. Tuning began in scores of European nations; now the process stretches around the globe with trials in Australia and China and continuing projects in Africa, Russia, Central Asia, Latin America, and Japan.

U.S. work on Tuning began in 2009. The Lumina Foundation sponsored state-based projects in Utah, Indiana, and Minnesota, followed by Kentucky and Texas. In 2011, a consortium of institutions (from the “Midwestern Higher Education Compact”) joined the Tuning group. Then, in 2012, Lumina launched the first Tuning project in the world organized through a professional disciplinary society, the American Historical Association. The AHA created a team of 164 Tuning historians working in over 120 institutions across nearly forty states.⁶ The success of the AHA initiative led Lumina, in 2013, to extend Tuning to a second organization, the National Communication Association.⁷ The voluntary, decentralized efforts of faculty engaged in Tuning have not only helped clarify the objectives of different disciplines. Colleagues have also worked to integrate Tuning with several other academic reform projects that involve the nature of post-secondary degrees, the transfer of academic credit, the movement of students from two-year to four-year institutions, the design of general education programs, and the completion rate for post-secondary students.⁸

The Tuning Process

Tuning contains several core components that allow participants to explore a discipline or a program of study from a wide range of

perspectives. While the initiative's key elements have been at the heart of the work across the nation, their sequence and implementation vary considerably. The accompanying articles demonstrate the point. Tuning does not necessarily proceed in a straight, linear set of "steps." Colleagues tend to follow different routes, reflecting the nature of their disciplines, the purposes of their institutions, the issues they face on their campuses, the characteristics of their students, and the patterns of teaching and learning embraced by their instructors. Tuning is a unified project that unfolds in a variety of ways.⁹

The central component of Tuning involves the work of **defining a discipline core**. For many colleagues, this has been the "starting point" for Tuning discussions. At first, many faculty have difficulty stepping back far enough from their daily responsibilities to reflect on the fundamental learning that takes place in their discipline. But this is the topic on which they have the most knowledge, the greatest familiarity, and the deepest passion. Fortunately, discipline experts do not need to begin the conversation with a blank sheet of paper. The American Historical Association—and Tuning historians around the world—have already provided broad outlines of the knowledge and skills that are central to our discipline, statements that different institutions should customize to meet their own particular needs.¹⁰

A second component of Tuning calls for **mapping career pathways**. Participants record where students wind up after completing their major. The term "career" does not simply focus on jobs; it is also important to understand the track former students may take in further education. The "mapping" can begin with exit surveys of graduating students, information from an institution's alumni office, messages shared on a social networking site, or follow-up e-mails from a department. Whatever the source, the information builds a body of evidence about the paths students take, helps guide advising for current students, clarifies a department's promotional materials, assists the AHA in its own data collection on majors, and identifies the groups we need to speak with in the third component of Tuning.

That element involves **consulting with stakeholders**. Recognizing the range of functions that higher education serves in a community, discussions with a variety of groups (including students, alumni, parents, employers, administrators, policy makers, and employers) can help faculty better comprehend the way others view and evaluate our activities. This is especially important for history.

Unlike a field such as biosystems engineering, most people have a general sense of what we do and study. Well-planned focus group discussions with stakeholders can help clarify the understanding and expectations others have of our work and, in turn, help us become more effective advocates for history programs.

All of these discussions lead to a fourth component of Tuning, **honoring the discipline core**. The point is not simply to follow up on a history major or to learn how others perceive historical study. Faculty need to consider how their own sense of the discipline converges with (or diverges from) the perspectives of students, alumni, and the public. Their initial discipline core will likely undergo some thoughtful and appropriate revision.

The fifth component of Tuning calls for **implementing the discipline core**. The work may involve creating or redefining particular courses, altering class assignments, restructuring the curriculum, improving academic advising, expanding internship programs, or gathering meaningful data on student learning. It would not be surprising if faculty who are especially passionate about teaching launch into these activities after some *initial* department discussions. Jumping into the work so early does not complicate Tuning by “skipping” a step. Each faculty group in each institution will probably create its own way of arranging and ordering the different components of Tuning. In fact, the key guidebook to Tuning *anticipates* flexible, individualized approaches to the project, and has fittingly provided an appendix that offers “Variations on the Base Model.”¹¹

The Practical Difference Tuning Makes in the Work of “Assessment”

The list of “A” terms that Gabrielle Spiegel referenced in her essay on “The Triple ‘A’ Threat” rankle educators because procedures for assessing programs of study have often been narrow and poorly conceived. Much of the work has been “top-down” in the form of orders from administrators to faculty. Often, the reviews follow a single format, with all disciplines responding to the same questions, assumptions, and procedures. The work commonly takes place *within* an institution, paying little attention to those who are not part of the faculty or administration. And the results of the studies are

rarely shared with faculty (unless the review reveals major problems that need to be fixed).

The cumbersome, time-consuming, and seemingly pointless nature of past assessment work generates considerable frustration and resentment among faculty. But in a world where demands for accountability continue to expand, Tuning offers a reasonable alternative, providing a thoughtful—and useful—way to answer key questions about our educational work within disciplines:¹²

- Tuning places *faculty* in charge of review, assessment, and evaluation. The project expresses confidence in the ability of discipline experts to explain the nature and significance of their work.
- The process is *discipline-specific*, rejecting the idea that there is a single, uniform model of analysis for all areas of study.
- Tuning takes faculty outside of their own department and expects that the work of assessment and evaluation will be conducted *in collaboration* with disciplinary colleagues at *other* institutions.
- Tuning calls for disciplinary discussions that include students, alumni, administrators, employers, and policy makers, not simply academics.
- Reports from Tuning must address a wide, public audience, not simply specialists, and explain the work of a discipline in *clear and accessible language*.
- And Tuning requires *transparency* in the way we outline what students should know, understand, and be able to do. Faculty need to *reveal* information about disciplines and learning that has too often remained *concealed*, to make the implicit explicit, and to demystify our areas of research and teaching.

None of these issues are easy to answer. But the questions deal with the choices and decisions faculty members make every day. The work of Tuning is not abstract or irrelevant, but central to the tasks we face as educators.

Articles on Tuning

Tuning is a conversation about disciplinary ideals. It helps frame a cogent—and persuasive—narrative about the core principles of our field of study. And it provides a useful tool that addresses the

kinds of structural, administrative, and professional questions we regularly encounter at our institutions. More precisely, Tuning provides a *collection* of functional tools; it's the Swiss Army knife of reform initiatives. One week, a department might use a Tuning "device" to prepare for an external review. The next week, materials prepared for Tuning could clarify history's distinctive contributions to a college's General Education program. And the following month, Tuning might provide information to post on a website helping students understand their educational and career choices.

The following four articles in this issue of *The History Teacher* offer examples of the reflective and practical contributions Tuning can make in the daily work of historians. None of the issues addressed are obscure or atypical. All are critical to the operation and success of a history program. And each article demonstrates a different feature of the Tuning toolkit that provides concrete, practical assistance in the work of assessment, accreditation, accountability—and advocacy.

The essay from Dr. Sarah Shurts tackles one of the most pressing public issues in higher education today: helping our ever more diverse students transfer their earned credits effectively and successfully from two-year to four-year institutions. As Shurts explains, the goal is not simply to tally up credits and speed up the process of granting degrees. Instead, the core issue is to determine the learning that rests behind the numbers. What depth of knowledge and level of skills do students need to carry their success in an associate's program through to a bachelor's degree? The Tuning process helps in at least four ways: by creating a shared set of reference points about the core outcomes of historical study; by encouraging faculty at two- and four-year schools to align expectations about student competencies and capabilities; by recognizing that most history faculty have extensive teaching responsibilities in foundational, Gen Ed courses; and by building what Shurts thoughtfully identifies as "a sense of shared responsibility for student success."

Dr. Nancy Quam-Wickham expands the discussion on Tuning and the history survey class. Her essay reminds readers that the work they bring through Tuning to a reflective, thorough, and meaningful revision of introductory courses draws on the same body of core, disciplinary practices that historians apply to advances in archival research. In both cases, colleagues are expected to plunge into a rich and lively intellectual debate (in this case, focused on questions of

teaching and learning); to contextualize proposals within core sets of theories and models (examining issues such as developmental learning, at-risk students, and curriculum structure); to gather and reflect on well-grounded bodies of evidence to support their positions; to submit propositions to peer review; and to share their analyses with others in the field. For Quam-Wickham, the work of reforming the introductory survey at California State University, Long Beach took place within the complicated parameters of high academic expectations, existing policy demands, and pressing budgetary constraints. The inspirational spark came from considering the survey as an intentional, sequential “next step” for students moving on from Common Core classrooms. The “reimagined” course that Quam-Wickham developed extends the Core’s focus on active learning and applied knowledge and skills in ways appropriate to post-secondary education: addressing more complex content; building stronger collaborative proficiencies among students; and developing thoughtful exercises in self- and group assessment.

Drs. Elaine Carey and Tracey-Anne Cooper discovered how the Tuning process addressed a third issue to which many departments have had to respond: defining their distinctive contributions to the education provided by their institution. The work required something more than an interest in “best teaching practices.” Faculty needed to adopt a focused and systematic process for evaluating their discipline’s importance and intrinsic value, an approach that addressed not only what an instructor brought into a course but, more importantly, what a student took out of a classroom. Tuning, as the authors argue, helped faculty develop “the skills to create effective goals, outcomes and assessment tools,” identifying the informing principles of the discipline, clear proficiency goals, and reliable demonstrations of student achievement. When the stakes were raised even further—with an institutional report that recommended eliminating history courses from the core curriculum—the Tuning process helped faculty make explicit their own implicit assumptions about the contributions of history to a broader, liberal arts education. Tuning provided a way to address the learning expected of all students, not only majors, outlining general competencies, not simply those that were subject-specific.

The interdisciplinary group of authors from the University of Missouri-Kansas City and Avila University, including Drs. Andrew

Stuart Bergerson and Nathan Lindsay, along with Leah K. Gensheimer and Dan Stroud, poses a fourth intriguing question: what can faculty learn from working with stakeholders? The article details both the methods and the conclusions drawn from focus group discussions with history students and public history employers.¹³ Two sets of findings stand out in the research. First, by dividing students into separate groups—of non-majors, majors, and the “historically curious”—the authors gained a clear sense of the *developmental* nature of learning, a core pedagogical principle that should inform the work in Tuning in any discipline. Second, by opening discussions with those both inside and outside of the academy, the team recognized *common* sets of interests, particularly in the social, interpersonal, and collaborative forms of learning that history courses ought to address. As the authors report, stakeholder discussions are not a marginal “add-on” to assessment, but an essential means of crafting “sharper, clearer outcomes” in the Tuning process.

Notes

1. Anne Hyde, “Tuning and Teaching History as an Ethical Way of Being in the World,” *AHA Today: A Blog of the American Historical Association*, July 17, 2014, <<http://blog.historians.org/2014/07/tuning-teaching-history-ethical-way-world/>>.

2. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “A Triple ‘A’ Threat: Accountability, Assessment, Accreditation,” *Perspectives on History* 46, no. 3 (March 2008), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2008/a-triple-a-threat-accountability-assessment-accreditation>>.

3. The European University Association provides a useful overview of the Bologna Project at <<http://www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/the-european-higher-education-area-and-the-bologna-process>>. For the key research that brought Bologna to the attention of U.S. audiences, see Clifford Adelman, *The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn from a Decade of European Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2008), v, <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501332.pdf>>. In addition to Adelman’s pathbreaking work, one of the most influential studies of the Bologna project and its relevance to U.S. higher education may be found in Paul L. Gaston, *The Challenge of Bologna: What United States Higher Education Has to Learn from Europe, and Why It Matters That We Learn It* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2010).

4. A rich body of material on Tuning in the European Union—with links to Tuning projects in other parts of the world—may be found online at <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/> and <http://tuningacademy.org>. See, for example, the reports written by historians from different regions on the Tuning Academy website, <http://tuningacademy.org/category/thematic-areas/history/>. In addition, the *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* provides exceptional research on global innovations in Tuning and competence-based education at <http://www.tuningjournal.org>.

5. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, “Tuning Methodology,” <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/tuning-methodology.html>.

6. For information on the work of the AHA Tuning Project, see <http://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/current-projects/tuning>.

7. For the work of the NCA on Tuning, see <http://www.natcom.org/tuningproject/>.

8. Tuning is tightly connected with the “Degree Qualifications Profile” project in the U.S., a “qualifications framework” initiative that considers what students should know, understand, and be able to do when they complete a *degree*. See: Cliff Adelman, Peter Ewell, Paul Gaston, and Carol Geary Schneider, *The Degree Qualifications Profile: A Learning-Centered Framework for What College Graduates Should Know and Be Able to Do to Earn the Associate, Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree* (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation, 2014), <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/dqp.pdf>. The work of Tuning has also been integrated with multiple projects sponsored by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, including: Essential Learning Outcomes; Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP); High-Impact Practices; VALUE Rubrics; Quality Collaboratives; General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS); and Faculty Collaboratives. See the AAC&U’s homepage at <https://www.aacu.org>. For “Reports from Tuning USA Projects,” scroll to the close of the “Document Archive” provided by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment at <http://degreeprofile.org/document-archive/>.

9. A full description of the material below may be viewed in the well-written and thoughtful “guide” to Tuning, Institute for Evidence-Based Change, “Tuning American Higher Education: The Process,” 2012, available at both http://degreeprofile.org/press_four/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Tuning-Higher-Education-The-Process.pdf and http://www.iebcnow.org/IEBCPublicFiles/iebc_public/e8/e86cc217-d67c-4de1-b618-77c6986e5537.pdf.

10. See the American Historical Association’s “AHA History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core,” <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning/history-discipline-core>; and the Tuning Academy’s “Tuning Core Projects,” <http://tuningacademy.org/category/thematic-areas/history/>.

11. “Tuning American Higher Education: The Process,” 29-34.

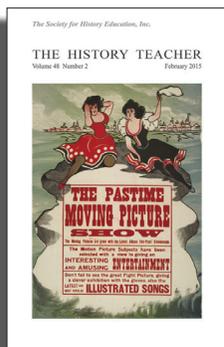
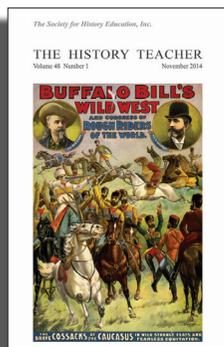
12. For additional reflections on assessment in the discipline of history, see James Grossman and Julia Brookins, “Assessment Is What We Make of It,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 2 (March 2016): 1132-1137; and Anne Hyde, “Five Reasons History Professors Suck at Assessment,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 2 (March 2016): 1104-1107.

13. For additional information on focus group discussions with employers, see Daniel J. McNerney, "Tuning History in Utah: Winning Friends and Influencing Policy Makers," *Perspectives on History* 52, no. 4 (April 2014), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2014/tuning-history-in-utah>>.



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