

Reply to David Welky's Review of the History Department's Graduate Program
Dr. Jeffrey L. Littlejohn
Associate Professor of History
Sam Houston State University
May 7, 2013

The faculty, staff, and students in the History Department at Sam Houston State University enjoyed Dr. David Welky's visit in January 2013 and learned a great deal from his analysis of the department's graduate program. This reply to his report is intended to show the concrete steps that the History Department, College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), and Graduate Studies have agreed to take in order to address Welky's suggested reforms. To that end, this statement will proceed through each item Welky proposed in the order that he presented them.

1. To address the need for additional faculty in the History Department, CHSS Dean John de Castro has requested funding for a new tenure-track line for the department beginning in fall 2013. In addition to this line, it is hoped that all efforts will be made to secure additional tenure-track lines for the History Department as resources become available. Without new lines it will be difficult for the History Department's graduate program to grow in an ample fashion because there simply will not be enough faculty to teach the necessary courses without shearing the undergraduate major of tenure-track faculty.

It has also been suggested that tenure-track faculty be discouraged from teaching overloads in the graduate program to focus on their publications, or that the number of chits needed to secure a semester-long research leave be reduced to 30 for tenure-track faculty, so that they might take leave to finish their books before their tenure vote.

2. While this review process has already improved communication lines between the History Department, CHSS, and Graduate Studies, Kandi Tayebi, Dean of Graduate Studies and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, has suggested that she or a representative from her office meet with the members of the History Department in a formal session each semester to discuss the graduate program and opportunities for development and improvement. This proposal will be implemented in fall 2013.

3. To address the need for additional long-term planning in the History Department, Chair Brian Domitrovic has activated a Needs Committee to be led by Distinguished Professor of History James Olson and to include Director of Graduate Studies Jeff Littlejohn. This committee will begin meeting prior to fall 2013.

4. In order to better track students after graduation, Professor of History Ken Hendrickson recommended that the department resume exit-interviews, which James Olson oversaw in years past. This idea will be implemented in fall 2013 along with yearly reviews of enrollment, graduation, and placement data.

5. Dr. Welky's suggestion that the Graduate Advisor be compensated for his/her work will be implemented in fall 2013. Dean de Castro has provided a course reduction each term for the current director, and Dean Tayebi has requested that a \$3,000 stipend be attached to the position.

6. The Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the History Department disagree with Dr. Welky's statement that the History Department must "come to grips with the fact that there really are two M.A. programs—one online and one in a more traditional setting." While we concur that there are some profound pedagogical differences between the two delivery methods, we also agree with our colleagues Ken Hendrickson and Terry Bilhartz that one of the strengths of the existing program is that it provides a single, undifferentiated degree that allows students to take courses on-campus or online. Many of our students find this very attractive and do not want a graduation certificate that says "online degree."

That said, the Director of Graduate Studies believes that Dr. Tayebi's offer to fund a pilot program with Quality Matters in which faculty discuss and evaluate their online courses would be an excellent opportunity to improve the educational experience for students in the distance program. This move would also get to the heart of Dr. Welky's concern: that steps be taken to evaluate and analyze the way that online courses are being conducted.

Dean de Castro provided another crucial step forward for the History Department's graduate program when he agreed to raise the salaries of graduate teaching assistants to \$13,000 in fall 2013. This will boost morale, productivity, and bring a sense of added responsibility to the position. In addition, it will enable the Director of Graduate Studies to secure stronger applicants for the on-campus program.

7. One of the most startling facts raised in the Welky report is the small number of minorities and women currently in the program. To address this issue, Dr. Tayebi agreed to offer a \$5,000 scholarship, which could be split up among several candidates, to encourage attendance and completion of the program by minority candidates. Moreover, Graduate Studies has agreed to help the History Department begin an advertising campaign in South Texas in an effort to secure additional Hispanic enrollment.

8. Ken Hendrickson has pioneered the use of an "embedded librarian" in his courses, and he has agreed to share the results of his experience working with Erin Cassidy to the department. He has also pursued publication of his experience in journal form. His pilot program will be expanded in fall 2013.

9. The members of the History Department are participating in an on-going discussion about graduate fields, concentrations, and the "core of excellence" approach. At this time, the Graduate Committee is considering these issues, but no conclusions can yet be drawn. It is safe to say, however, that there will continue to be a need for broad historical coverage in the graduate program, since the department offer fields in European, World, and Latin American history.

10. While Dr. Welky's statistics about professional presentations by graduate students was inaccurate, his larger point that departmental faculty should offer writing assignments that lend themselves to publications or presentations remains true. Indeed, this year alone seven students

in Jeffrey Littlejohn's Public History course (HIST 5388) published chapters in *Historic Walker County: An Illustrated History* (Historical Publishing Network, 2012), eight students in Tom Cox's course on Texas Legal Controversies (HIST 5397) wrote essays for a digital project on U.S. Supreme Court cases that originated in Texas, and eleven students in Jeffrey Littlejohn's Public History course (HIST 5388) completed essays for a 45,000-word book on Camp Huntsville that will be published in 2014 with Texas Review Press. In addition, five of the nine on-campus graduate teaching assistants presented at professional conferences, including the Eighth Annual Ohio University Graduate History Conference, the East Texas Historical Association Annual Conference, and the Southwestern Social Sciences Association Annual Conference.

11. The Graduate Committee is currently discussing the advisability of a required historiography course. While many members of the committee believe this is a good idea, it is hard to disagree with Terry Bilhartz's point that historiography is a complicated topic that differs by subject. There are separate historiographical canons in political, gender, religious, and environmental history (to name only a few of the sub-fields taught in the department). It would be impossible to teach all of these relevant historiographical canons in one course, and thus we are continuing this discussion in an attempt to find another alternative.

12. There is an existing mechanism to remove people from the graduate faculty, and the Chair of the History Department will make use of this process should the need arise. At this time, the Chair and Graduate Director agree that no such move is necessary or desirable, first on account of the good performance of all our graduate faculty, and second because it would do damage to departmental efficiency, morale, and effectiveness.

13. Mentorship for new faculty is underway in the History Department, and the Graduate Director and graduate faculty are in constant communication with students who would like mentors. This semester Drs. Wesley Phelps and Andrew Orr led a session on c.v. development for graduate students, and Drs. James Olson, Jeffrey Littlejohn, and Wesley Phelps held a day-long event on research methods and publication opportunities for interested students.

14. Dr. Welky's point that more must be done to create a sense of community and belonging among the graduate students is key to the longevity and growth of the program. Dr. Tayebi has agreed to support the department in this matter by providing examples that other graduate programs at the university have used to foster a sense of community among their students. These include having a teaching assistant run an interactive blog or chat room that would discuss the day-to-day issues of managing a household and being a graduate student, using Facebook or other social media to communicate with students, and, most importantly, starting a yearly online conference for students at Sam Houston State University.

15. Beginning in fall 2013, the Graduate Committee will convene a series of "best practices" seminars designed to share successful teaching techniques. We will also discuss some standardization of class expectations and produce a statement of best practices for online and on-campus courses in the program.