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Historians currently have the privilege of maintaining enrollments by teaching a large number of students who are in our classrooms because of a specific requirement or a general education option. The place of history in general education has traditionally rested on our discipline's potential to prepare citizens for engagement in a democratic republic; and arguably, now more than ever, citizens need to be able to evaluate sources and evidence in a glut of digital information, and to think clearly in the midst of a cacophony of voices in the public sphere. With that privileged place in college curricula, however, must come an increased sense of responsibility to engage all students more effectively, and use our courses to enhance their ability to navigate college, community, and eventually a workplace. For too many students new to the culture and structure of higher education, an introductory history course is a barrier to success in college, rather than a gateway.

And that's what our introductory courses should be. Perhaps less of a march through time than a gateway to the skills, competencies, and habits of mind that enable students to succeed in any program of study, to secure meaningful employment after graduation, and to contribute to their communities. When students learn "historical thinking," they learn to use historical content to establish context and to think about how change happens as they compare the past to our very different present. They also gain a foundation in a broad range of 21st century skills, including writing, textual (and contextual) analysis, geographical and cross-cultural literacy, and the use of evidence strengthened by an appreciation for ambiguity. To succeed in college, and subsequently to navigate career and community, students must learn to evaluate accounts and interpretations of things that (ostensibly) happened – whether those are accounts of an election, a riot, a board meeting, or a lab experiment, and whether they have only one account to work with, or competing accounts. They can, and should, learn this kind of thinking in an introductory history course.

Evidence, however, suggests that something is amiss, at least in US history courses, and I'm not sure there's much reason to suspect it's much different when a survey focuses on other geographical spaces. Data from the John N. Gardner Institute on 32 institutions over three years show that introductory history courses disproportionately choked academic progress for the least advantaged students, based on Pell Grant status, race, and first-generation college attendance. Many students who failed one history course but were otherwise eligible to remain enrolled dropped out of college altogether. Improving student performance in these and other introductory history courses stands to dramatically improve the completion, retention, and graduation rates of these students.

These populations, currently the least served by introductory courses as currently offered, will increasingly constitute the twenty-first century student body in the United States. These data should be a wakeup call for historians, as well as anyone else who cares about the value of liberal learning and the democratic potential of higher education. Because everything has a history, any student should be able to find ways to engage with the value of historical thinking—if a course can be designed with such opportunities in mind.

What We Know and Don't Know about Introductory Courses

Lamenting the lack of preparation of students for college is a commonplace among higher education faculty, especially in nonelite institutions. It is also unproductive. We teach the students who enter our classrooms, whether in person or online. Education research that focuses on the students themselves is helpful, providing insight into what causes them to miss class, turn in assignments late, or otherwise fail to adequately complete the course requirements. But we must go a step further to devise practices that will enable them to succeed. This does not mean watering down standards. It means devising curricular and classroom strategies that address these challenges to increase learning. A different stream of education research reframes these same “deficits” in terms of social and cultural capital, and sense of belonging; the focus remains on what the students are (and are not) bringing to the table, but the framing opens doors to pedagogical strategies. “Evidence-based pedagogies,” stripped of jargon, simply means drawing on what we know about students and student learning to reconsider how we teach.

Rather than accept the simplistic response of some faculty that students are “not college material,” a particularly useful strand of education research has pointed to several factors that affect students’ readiness and ability to succeed:

- Complicated lives with personal and family commitments that prevent them from focusing on academics
- Inadequate preparation in basic academic skills (writing, reading, etc.) can be a major contributor to failure rates, particularly at institutions with relatively open access admissions policies.
- Students don’t uniformly bring to history courses the dispositions necessary to succeed. When students lack a sense of belonging, for instance, or have not developed confidence in their ability to grow intellectually, they’re less likely than peers to persist when they encounter difficulties. These might be especially pronounced when there is a disconnect between what the instructor is trying to teach and what the student thinks she is trying to learn—for example, if “thinking historically” is not adequately explained. This is especially likely when students enter college with notions (drawn from middle and high school classes) of history itself as a narrative fixed by a chain of facts.

Education research has identified several strategies for overcoming these stumbling blocks. Dispositions like a sense of belonging and growth mindset can be developed. Faculty and institutions can do specific, sustainable, small things to help *all* students develop the belonging and mindsets that will help them succeed. One significant reason students fail history courses is that many faculty and institutions do *not* do these things, although evidence from other disciplines is compelling about what is possible. Academic knowledge and skills also can be developed; otherwise we might as well close our educational institutions at all levels. For instance, in STEM disciplines, systematic formative assessment, something generally not learned in graduate student pedagogy courses, has been shown to enhance teaching and learning.

While the research on effective strategies in STEM education is deep, less has been invested in research on the most effective ways to address inequities in humanities learning. Initial, unpublished research by the Gardner Institute, spanning several disciplines, shows that courses that implemented a comprehensive plan to transform gateway courses, using engaged pedagogy practices, active learning strategies, and student analytics saw increases in retention, grades, and rates of academic standing, with decreases in DFWI rates. At Nevada State College, 74% of students in transformed courses attained good academic standing (defined as GPA greater than 2.0) compared with 65% of students with good academic standing in non-transformed courses. At Arkansas Tech, six courses across different disciplines experienced a decline in DFWI rates for all students ranging from 2.2% to 11.6%. And at Western Michigan University, DFWI rates were lowered significantly for minority students; rates were lowered by 8.8 to 17.4 percentage points for African American students, by 6.2 to 17.8 percentage points for Hispanic students, and by 2.5 to 37.1 percentage points for students self-identifying as two or more races.

What is to be done?

The scholarship of teaching and learning in history reveals that the discipline is in the early stages of a pedagogical paradigm shift, from directed instruction to active learning; from history as a recounting of the past, to history as problem-driven, with a heightened emphasis on explicit steps in using both primary and secondary sources to learn the principles of historical thinking. Redesigning courses for “uncoverage,” almost inevitable in World History, and using inquiry-based pedagogies linked to primary sources can help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in history courses.

Listening to lectures and taking traditional exams tend not to develop these skills; instead, these traditional pedagogical methods often simply reward (or punish) students more for what they bring to the class than for how much they grow. We expect that revising history courses will help support student learning across their college careers in part by helping them to answer three questions important for the transition to college: Can I do the work? Do I belong here? Does this connect with any vision I have for my future self?

History Gateways

With the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the AHA will lead an evaluation and substantial revision of introductory college-level history courses so that they better serve students from all backgrounds and align more effectively with the future needs of a complex society. Starting in January 2019 and running through December 2022, the AHA and the Gardner Institute will work closely with faculty from 11 two- and four-year institutions, clustered around three regional hubs.

Houston: Texas Southern University, Houston Community College, the University of Houston–Downtown, and the University of Houston.

Chicago: Purdue University Northwest, Waubesa Community College, Roosevelt University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

New York/New Jersey: St. Francis College, Bergen Community College, and Kean University.

These partnerships will draw on the AHA's successful Tuning project and adapt the Gardner Institute's successful Gateways to Completion program (G2C) to rethink the purpose and substance of what it means to be "introduced" to history at the postsecondary level, and to develop models for implementing these alternatives.