April 20, 2011.

To: Michael Muise  
From: James Epstein (Chair, History)  
and Mark Schoenfield (Chair, English)

Re: Dissolution of the joint interdisciplinary major in English and History

The English Department (20-3, April 6, 2011) and the History Department (20-0, March 28, 2011) have both voted separately to terminate the joint interdisciplinary major in English and History. Our rationales for doing this fall into two categories, pedagogical and logistical (with priority to the pedagogical concerns).

1. Background

The major was created in 2002, with the first students enrolling as majors in fall of 2003.

Here is a description of it, as first conceived:

The interdisciplinary concentration in English and History offers students the opportunity to integrate literary and historical studies in a sustained and systematic way. Students interested in the areas of intersection and cross-fertilization between these two fields have a variety of options in the English and History concentration. Examples of such areas of intersection would include:

(a) The works of a particular writer, coupled with courses that explore the social and cultural context reflected in those works (for example: Shakespeare and Early-Modern England).

(b) An exploration of a particular literary genre, coupled with courses on one or more of the social and cultural contexts in which that genre flourished (for example: 'folklore and Appalachia').

(c) A study of a major thematic area of literary production, coupled with courses about the social and cultural contexts germane to that theme (for example: literary treatments of race and the shaping of Caribbean cultures).

(d) A study of a particular historical era or cultural milieu, coupled with courses about the literary production associated with that era or milieu (for example: the Great Depression and American literature of the 1930s). Each student designs a specialized program and develops a contract of courses totaling 36 hours. The program may be chronological (for example, medieval, early modern, or modern), geographical (for example, American, British, or Caribbean), or topical (for example, gender, power, or race). The contract must be approved by the Director of Undergraduate Studies in both English and History.
And here is a listing of the number of majors in the program since its creation:

2003: 7
2004: 9
2005: 6
2006: 11
2007: '16
2008: 23
2009: 31
2010: 23
2011: 26

2. Pedagogical concerns

Our main concerns about the major are threefold:

a. Incoherent
At the outset, the major required students to design a truly interdisciplinary course of study, as laid out in the principles of the major's founding rationale. This course of study was formally enshrined in a contract that all majors had to sign and fulfill. However, over time, this requirement for a contract (and a coherent course of interdisciplinary work) was dropped because it proved very difficult to manage, year-in, year-out, both at the departmental level and at the level of the Registrar's office. Nothing has been put in place to replace the contract.

b. Anemic
When one looks at the typical course of study actually pursued by students within the major, one finds that the only class that actually fulfills the mission of interdisciplinarity set forth in the major's rationale is Hist 291/Eng 280, the team-taught Workshop in English and History. Aside from this single course, many students simply rack up a certain number of hours of History or English courses. These courses may or may not entail interdisciplinary objectives and methods. Thus, it is possible, and common, for students to fulfill the requirements for this major simply by taking Hist 291, followed by a random assortment of English and History courses. There is nothing programmatically special or distinctive about the resultant motley assortment of courses. While student report being satisfied with their experience in the major, they are receiving a less intensive experience than either department thinks is best for them, taking what amounts to, roughly, two minors. It is conceivable that a new major—British Studies, Literature and History—might be developed, but it would be so substantively different from this major that maintaining this one in storage would not provide an effective template by which to consider such a new program.

Finally, there is no capstone requirement for this major.
c. Revision-resistant

Over the years, various DDS's have recognized these failings of the major, and have attempted to revise or modify the major to address them. All these efforts have met with failure.

3. Logistical concerns

a. It has proven to be very difficult to staff Hist 291, the Workshop in English and History, from year to year. Each year the DDS and staff have to scramble to find professors willing to teach this course, which has to be offered each year because it is required for the major.

4. How will students be affected by the termination of the major?

Existing students would be grandfathered in, and we would need to continue to offer the H291 courses, and staff the major, until all students in it have graduated.

If the major were abolished, presumably a portion (perhaps half) of the students attracted to the major would instead choose to do either a straight history major or English major or a double major in English and in History. Students who are drawn to combine English and History as fields of study could still take History 291, which our two departments could continue to offer as often as we wished. We would no longer be required to scramble to offer H291 every year, however, which would be a very good thing. We could certainly advise students so inclined toward a major/minor combination.

Moreover, if a student majored in History and minored in English, this would entail the added pedagogical benefit of requiring the student to complete a capstone.

The dissolution of the major is not an issue for SACS.
Dear Jonathan and Timothy,

Please find attached two proposals that were passed by votes of 3 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, at the CEP meeting of February 24, 2012.

Thank you,
Leonard Folgarait
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