

'Tuning' History

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If you meet (or want to hire) someone with a bachelor's degree in history, what qualities should you be confident that the person has? What skills should the person have?

One of the persistent criticisms of American higher education is that most people wouldn't really know, and that one college's history majors would be so different from another's that the phrase "B.A. in history" doesn't really convey much. Changing that is the idea behind the Lumina Foundation's ["tuning"](#) efforts, modeled after similar initiatives in Europe, to work with states and higher education systems to define what various degree levels generally mean. The foundation aspires to link various degree programs as well, through its [Degree Qualifications Profile](#).

In a major expansion of that effort, the American Historical Association announced late Friday a three-year effort with Lumina to define what an associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree in history should mean. History is the first discipline to embrace the Lumina approach, and its doing so may be significant for several reasons. One is that Lumina officials have been criticized by some academics for pushing ahead on some of its ideas with relatively little grassroots faculty involvement. The history effort is coming from a disciplinary association, and the key decision makers will all be scholars.

Further, while some fields must regularly compare their programs to others because the fields are regulated by specialized accreditors or graduates must obtain state licenses, history is typical of many liberal arts fields in that it has never faced those pressures.

Clifford Adelman, a senior associate with the Institute for Higher Education Policy who has worked on Lumina's tuning efforts, said that that it was "very significant" for any field to take on this project on a discipline-wide level and "even more so in a traditional arts and sciences field." He noted that history "straddles both the humanities and social sciences," making the results relevant to many other

disciplines. And he said that the AHA project goes beyond even European efforts in that the historians are including community colleges -- while European tuning efforts have started at the bachelor's level.

The AHA plans to convene meetings of historians to define the qualities associated with various degree levels, and then to try to help 60 departments at a range of institutions use the results to tune their programs. The development of the degree expectations is being led by historians at six institutions (reflecting the range of institutional missions that the AHA hopes the guidelines will speak to): Cleveland State University, Colorado College, Georgia Institute of Technology, Raritan Valley Community College, University of California at San Diego and Wheaton College, of Massachusetts.

James Grossman, executive director of the AHA, stressed that the effort is about qualities that should be associated with history graduates, not about the history facts or concepts individual students learn. "This is not content-driven," he said. The effort is not about "who was in, who was out" of history or "how could you teach American history without X, Y or Z.... This is about competencies."

Some of the qualities associated with graduates may be those that would be associated with other liberal arts disciplines. For instance, Grossman speculated that the tuning document might suggest that someone with a bachelor's degree in history should be a good critical thinker or a good communicator -- qualities that might be associated with other majors as well. Other qualities, he said, might be specific to history majors. For instance, he said that the tuning might support the idea that history majors should "be able to understand how change happens" or "to understand the importance of context." Or history majors perhaps should "understand the relationship between structure, agency and culture." Different expectations might be developed for associate and graduate programs.

Such qualities could be applied across colleges with varying student populations, levels of competitiveness and missions, Grossman said. The key is to focus on the broad categories, not the reality that some students may have more ability than others. "I can throw a ball. I can't throw a ball as well as a major league pitcher, and no one is going to expect me to throw a ball as well as a major league pitcher, but I can throw a ball," he said.

The major change in mindset for all departments, Grossman said, would be to

focus on the endpoint of what a graduate should be able to do. "What we often don't do in the academy is start from the outcome," he said. "We need to ask what we want our students to learn. It's not what do we want to teach."

When the various measures are defined, he said, departments can then evaluate their programs, and he predicted some might find areas they need to change. For example, he said that "we want our students to understand context, but in many of our introductory courses, we assume that they do." While Grossman said that he hoped departments would in fact review and change their programs and requirements, he said that didn't mean they needed to embrace any one way of measuring success, such as the use of standardized tests.

Some departments might opt to measure qualities such as critical thinking with tests, he said, but others might use portfolios. There is no presumption that one method is preferred. "We're trying to stay away as much as possible from the word 'measurement.' Assessment does not mean measurement."

In moving ahead with an effort that will be "faculty-driven," Grossman said he thought the history association was providing a model on how to better define academic expectations without giving up the traditional role of professors. "This is a much better way for departments to grapple with assessment than have someone from the outside say, 'This is what your students should know and how you should be teaching,' " he said.