

Final Report

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Context, Purpose and Motivation

I was assigned to conduct an assessment of the History of Art Undergraduate Curriculum and Program – that is, the entirety of the course offerings, mentoring and other academic activities that make up the Undergraduate Program in History of Art at UC Berkeley. This program affects at least 105 undergraduate students a year: currently 58 declared majors, 39 intended majors and 8 known minors, as well as non-major students enrolled in history of Art Courses. In this assessment, I was working with Prof. Bonnie Wade, acting chair of the department, Prof. Lisa Trever, the director of the undergraduate curriculum committee, Amy Tamayo, the current undergraduate advisor for History-of-Art students and Dr. Yukiko Wantabe from the Center of Teaching and Learning on campus.

The assessment followed a recent departmental review (2014-15) which asked for the consideration of a variety of topics in the creation of a new strategic plan for the Undergraduate Program. The areas that were addressed in this assessment were areas that were identified by the review for this purpose and the data and qualitative responses collected through the assessment process were intended to inform the creation of this departmental strategic plan, which was to be evaluated annually and as part of the next departmental review. Areas and specific questions we were looking to explore included:

- The effectiveness of the new curriculum in History of Art (since Fall 2014)
- The effectiveness of the new curriculum in meeting the new intellectual mission of the department.
- Support for undergraduate career preparation and faculty advising in general
- Relationships with both the campus career center and museums
- Summer courses, and reasons why students would and wouldn't take up the option of summer courses.
- The Desire for a new combined BA/MA program
- Fostering community
- Diversity and equity

The new curriculum refers to a change in the course structure for major students. While pre-2014, students came into the program having to declare a focus and take classes within specific genres (Western Art, Asian Art, other), they now have to take classes across a range of five different geographical areas and time periods before declaring a focus.

The faculty requested several types of assessment to explore the areas stated above, including a review of online program information for accuracy and consistency, and a series of undergraduate focus groups. They also requested the creation of an exit survey, although this was not possible given the time constraints of the project.

Methods and Tools

During the Fall component of the project, I reviewed program content including course offerings and syllabi and student learning goals for both the new and old curriculum. I also took the opportunity to familiarize myself with the course structure and program offerings of the department, as well as to meet with stakeholders of the undergraduate history of art program, including the current undergraduate advisor.

As the areas that the faculty wanted to explore were relatively broad, and to get a sense of what specific issues students had within these open topics, it was decided that focus groups were the best means to start data collection in the spring. Together with faculty I developed a list of open-ended questions that probed the areas the faculty wanted to address. After grouping these questions according to theme and working with faculty to refine the number of questions down to a manageable amount for an hour long focus group. For this, I had to balance the number of topics that I could cover with the depth that I would be able to go into such topics. To further develop the instrument, I then had to order the questions into a logical sequence of related topics, attempting to structure the focus group as I would a productive conversation. This extended to the type and format of the questions themselves – they needed to be open enough to engineer a good discussion, but not too open-ended, in order to keep the discussion productive and focused. Finally I developed the focus group protocol attached, which was my main source of instrumentation for the project.

I then sent out a course-wide invitation to students inviting them to participate in the focus groups and grouped the students who responded into two groups. Bearing in mind that the faculty wanted a representative range of students sampled – that is, students who have had widely varying experiences of the course and program – I had initially wanted to group students into two groups: 1) freshmen and sophomores and 2) juniors and seniors. However, due to the fact that the majority of students who replied were seniors, I was unable to carry out this grouping. The faculty also wanted me to ask the students about issues that pertained directly to transfer students, and thus, I tried to accommodate equal numbers of transfer students in both groups. I initially invited sixteen students to take part – one group containing one minor, one freshman, three seniors and four transfer students, containing eight students in total, and the other containing three juniors, five seniors and five transfer students, also containing eight students in total. When I held the groups they were less well attended than I had hoped – the first group contained six students and the second group contained three senior transfer students in total, making it more of an open interview rather than a focus group.

Having conducted both focus groups, I then transcribed both data sets and then set about synthesizing both of the discussions – organizing the responses from each group in a logical order, identifying similarities and differences in responses to each different topic within and across both groups and identifying supporting quotes to illustrate classes of responses. I then had to work to present the results in a way that they would be easily and immediately understood by an audience – that is, grouping responses by valence and highlighting and underlying important words and phrases to make them immediately stand out to someone glancing at the report. This synthesis process resulted in a report of sixteen pages – I then had to summarize these results into a two page report to share with faculty.

What's next?

I presented a summary of the results from the focus groups at the final undergraduate curriculum committee meeting of the academic year. At the committee meeting, possible solutions to some of the problems students brought up were discussed, with the promise that some of the smaller and more easily resolvable issues students have raised (for instance, not having a common space to meet), will be resolved. I hope that the results will go on to be used to inform the departmental strategic plan

The problem with focus group data, however, is the fact that the sample sizes of students interviewed were very small, and two rather than multiple focus group data were collected. This means that the responses generated may not have been representative for the whole class of undergraduates in the history of art program. There is also the issue of self-selection – the fact that students who nominate themselves to take part in a focus group are a particular type of student, whose motivations and needs differ from that of other students in the department. For instance, almost all of the students in the focus

group I talked to said that they were intending to apply for graduate school once they had left college - faculty were skeptical that all students in the program were similarly driven. In order to get data that are more representative, the next step would be to use the results of the focus group to develop specific items that could be used in an exit survey. There was not time for this, within the remit of this project, and I hope that a student in the future will be able to apply for a similar award in the future, to carry this work on to its natural conclusion.

Tips and Strategies for Engagement

In terms of practical tips, I would avoid scheduling a focus group on the day before a holiday – for the focus group I scheduled the day before Spring break, eight people said that they would show up, and only three did. The three that did, however, were all seniors who had transferred and we were therefore able to have a particularly rich discussion about the experiences of transfer students in the department. I would thus advise that if one wants to know more about the experience of a particular type of student – especially if that type of student is in a minority within the department, interviewing a small group of such students together might give one a richer insight into their experience than you would get from a one-on-one interview or a more departmentally representative focus group. In terms of general engagement, both focus groups had people who didn't show up, despite responding to say they were interested in taking part. I think this is simply something that has to be expected, especially when dealing with student populations, and should be taken into account when scheduling or organizing focus groups. In terms of other tips and strategies:

- Several of the focus group participants compared and contrasted particular aspects of the history of art program with aspects of other departments that they or their friends had experiences of. It seems that studying the activities of other departments may be a good way to collect ideas for modifications to existing programs.
- During my preliminary investigations in Fall, I found that the student learning goals for the updated History of Art curriculum were nearly identical to the student learning goals for the old curriculum, despite the major differences between the two. I would recommend that if a big curricula overhaul is undertaken, that the student learning goals should be updated to reflect the major changes made. Additionally, the more specific and focused the student learning goals are, the easier it is to determine if the new curriculum is meeting these requirements.
- For a curricular evaluation, alongside focus groups and surveys of students, I would recommend compiling a curriculum map to assess whether undergraduate curriculum program outcomes are being highlighted in individual courses. This would ideally be coupled with interviews with faculty to determine their understanding and promoting of program level outcomes in their courses. Some of the students I talked to in the focus groups criticized some courses as being narrow and specific, indicating faculty may need to more explicitly emphasize program outcomes in their syllabi and teaching.

Appendix – Focus Group Protocol

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Focus Group Protocol

1. Purpose

The purpose of this focus group is to gain an insight into undergraduate perceptions of the history of art undergraduate program, and to better understand the needs and expectations of this group. A facilitator will ask a small group of undergraduates to describe their experience of the undergraduate program, and assess how well the department is meeting their expectations and needs. The information will be used to respond to a recent departmental review (2014-15), which asked the department to create a new strategic plan for the Undergraduate Program.

2. Necessary resources

- A room with the capacity for up to 9 people.
- Personnel: facilitator
- Equipment: two digital or tape recorders (facilitator will organize), extension cords, extra tapes, batteries.
- Consent form.

3. Procedures and guided questions

(A) Opening: Brief introduction of the facilitator

(B) Present the Purpose of the Focus Group:

We are here today to talk about your experience so far in this program. The undergraduate history of art course has been recently re-designed to better meet your interests and needs. So, the purpose today is to get your perceptions on several aspects of the undergraduate course and program, so that the department can make improvements where they are necessary. Your perceptions are what we're interested in hearing, so there are no right or wrong answers – you should say what you think.

(C) Explain the Discussion Procedure

I will be taking notes and tape recording the discussion, so that I don't miss anything you say. As you know, everything is confidential and no one, including any advisors, will know who said what. This should be a group discussion, so feel free to respond to me and other member's opinions in the group. It is also important for everyone to have an equal opportunity to express their opinions. You can jump in at any time, but I would appreciate it if only one person spoke at once. During the discussion, you can agree or disagree with each other and you can change your mind. The discussion will last approximately 45 minutes. There are several questions we need to cover, so I will move the discussion along to make sure that happens.

(D) Opening question

Can you briefly introduce yourselves – your name, whether you are a major or a minor, and your year?

→what is your general impression of being in art history? / →In general, how satisfied are you with the art history undergraduate program?

Courses – focus of study

→How do you decide on your focus of study?

→Did you know which area you wanted to focus on before you entered the department?

→How much guidance do you get on choosing a focus of study?

Course topics

→Are they diverse enough or are they too diverse? Are there any course topics that you feel are missing / aren't offered?

→If certain course topics are offered during summer, would you take them?

(E) Courses--enrollment

→Have you been able to enroll for all the courses that you want?

(F) Independent Research

→How comfortable are you at doing independent research (i.e. for a class).

→Is there anything the department could be doing to help you, with respect to developing your research skills?

(G) Faculty Advising

→How satisfied are you with faculty advising?

→What makes a good faculty advisor?

(H) Community

→What kind of department extra-curricular activities (outside of courses) are you aware of?

→Do you take part in H.Art socials? Why / Why not?

→If there was a formal peer advising system, would you use it? Why or why not?

(I) Career

→What are your plans after graduation?

→What are some of the career options art history graduates can have?

→Is there anything the department could do better in terms of career preparation or guidance?

(J) BA/MA program

→There's been talk about starting a combined BA/MA program (five year program in total, where you'd have to take some graduate classes and write a thesis, and then you'd leave with the Masters credential) – would that be something that would be interesting to you? Why?

(K) Changes

→Are there any specific recommendations you can think of that would improve the undergraduate program?

(L) Wrap up and recap

(M) Closing remarks

Thank you very much for providing us with your perceptions and opinions about the undergraduate course and department. Your comments have been very helpful, and I will summarize the results and report them to the department, so they can make sure that the undergraduate course is meeting students' needs.

Focus Group Result Summary

Two focus groups were held on the 22nd and 24th of March. Focus group 1: 6 students in total, 1 art history minor, 1 declared freshman, and a mix of declared juniors and seniors (2 of whom were transfer students). Focus group 2: 3 students, all seniors and transfer students.

Major Themes	Quotes
<p>1. OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE PROGRAM</p> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both groups expressed overall satisfaction with the program. Junior faculty and post-docs were identified by both groups as easy to approach and knowledgeable <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior faculty were described by the transfer students as harder to approach and less encouraging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In general, really, really happy” “The junior faculty are really amazing and dynamic” “Senior faculty seem less interested in teaching and interacting with undergrads”
<p>2. FOCUS OF STUDY – SHAPED BY PROGRAM, OR KNEW COMING IN?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 3/4 of the non-transfer students had an idea of their focus of study coming in to the program. The majority of transfer students had their interests shaped by courses, professors and wanting to avoid elements of politics in the department. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I more or less knew my concentration coming in” “My interests changed over time as I took different classes with different professors.”
<p>3. CURRICULUM: COURSE OFFERINGS</p> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The range of courses offered satisfy students’ interests <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both groups commented on the sporadic variety of course offerings between semesters (n=6) A student in group 1 requested more coordination within the course setup, with respect to courses that satisfy specific time period or geographical requirements. (n=1) <p>Requests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More modern art and museum classes Indicating if a course is offered regularly or repeating popular courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Generally classes have been offered in my interests, but I think it was serendipitous rather than actually planned.” “It would be helpful to know if courses were offered regularly or not – like whether the course will be offered again, or if it’s a one-time deal.”

<p>4. CURRICULUM: CONTENT AND LEARNING</p> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breadth requirements have forced students in both groups to take courses in areas they wouldn't have otherwise, and have enjoyed <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students in both groups can feel pigeon holed into taking classes just to fulfil requirements. Both groups described upper and lower division classes as narrow and specific. For both groups, there was a need for instructors emphasize how classes are relevant and how the skills developed in classes can be used by students to develop their individual research / career interests. <p>Fostering independent Research Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both groups suggested that writing workshops or more opportunities for peer editing would be helpful – especially for those writing honor's theses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Upper division courses are very specific – it feels like I have certain amounts of knowledge about certain things and it's hard to focus on a particular area. Not 100% realistic for preparing us for a grad program or professional work.” “The thesis can be a little intimidating and lonesome – a workshop or peer would be beneficial.”
<p>5. SUMMER COURSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The transfer students were more ambivalent about summer courses though they mentioned that they were more intense and rushed than normal classes. The non-transfer students were more negative, mentioning the high cost of tuition and having other commitments during the summer (work / internships) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “For me, no, because you have to pay tuition, which is expensive and if you want to go into the museum field you have to do internships in those summers.”
<p>6. ADVISING</p> <p>Staff advising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 1 expressed frustration at the high turnover of staff advisors and would like to hear more about important dates, deadlines, and career fairs from staff advisors <p>Faculty advising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 2 expressed broad satisfaction with faculty advising, and found them to be more helpful with respect to course choice selection than staff advisors <p>Peer advising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 2 suggested starting a peer support group for new transfer students run by existing transfer students, to make the transition to the program easier. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Having faculty advice about what courses to take with what people is different from the advising you'd get from an administrator.” “I think having a transfer history of art group – to tell people ‘if you want to go to grad school, you're going to need to write an honours thesis’ would be amazing.”
<p>7. COMMUNITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally, group 1 felt the art history community was very disjointed. Both groups expressed dissatisfaction with H.Art and BAMPFA at fostering community. <p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 1 said it was hard to keep track of the departmental events announcements on bCourses and pointed out that minors, undeclared transfer students and prospective majors do not have access to the site. They would prefer departmental events to be publicized by professors or sent around by email. Group 2 expressed a desire for more assessments like the current focus group. <p>Suggestions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 1 suggested having a lounge for art history majors to hang out in, to foster a sense of community, or forming groups of grad students and prospective majors to discuss articles. Group 2 expressed a desire for more community outreach work opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Are these assessments ongoing or is this a one-time shot? I think one or every other year, this assessment should happen. People in the program should contribute to show how the program is treating them.” “The first time I got an email notification about anything going on in the art history community was the email about this focus group. I was like ‘wow, how did they get my email?’”

<p>8. COMBINED BA/MA</p> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both groups cited the professional advantages of having an MA over a BA when applying for museum jobs or graduate school • The response of transfer students, was overwhelmingly positive <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1 raised concerns about a possible increased intake of majors and how this would change class dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“For transfer students, it’s a really attractive option, because most students get two years and that’s not long enough.”</i>
<p>9. POST GRADUATION PLANS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students were planning to go to grad school, with the majority planning to take a gap year and work for a few years. <p>Career / grad school preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1 talked about the importance of fostering personal connections with professors, and how reaching out to professors could be intimidating. • Suggestions included having a separate type of faculty advising related specifically to careers and grad school. • Group 2 wanted more information about careers beyond the teaching, museum and gallery sphere. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“In general there needs to be a little more help in terms of getting students into grad school or into professional programs. That’s something I’ve got from an individual professor, but I wasn’t able to have that until I’d made that connection for myself.”</i>