

Self-Study Report on U.S. Experience in a World Context GENED 120
For the General Education Review Committee
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The U.S. Experience in a World Context GENED 120
Catalog Description:

This course examines the development of the United States, its peoples, cultures, values, and institutions in a global context of comparative history, focusing on the changing role of the U.S. in the world. Drawing from 18th and 19th century backgrounds, the course will primarily consider 20th century developments. May not be taken on an S/NC grade basis.

1. Sources of information used for this report

- a) *US Experience in a World Context* course proposal
- b) Earlier self-study reports
- c) Revised course objectives developed with *Global Perspectives* in Summer 2003
- d) Academic year 2004-2005 meetings with course instructors
- e) Recent syllabi for all active course instructors
- f) Results of Fall 2004 indirect assessment
- g) Preliminary results of Spring 2005 pre- and post-test assessment

2. Developments that have taken place since the last review:

- A. Two Faculty workshops in the History Department have enhanced efforts to improve writing instruction in History courses, including Gen Ed 120.
 - i. In 2003 grants from Letters & Sciences and the Chancellor's Excellence Fund supported a week-long History Faculty summer workshop that provided a review of the scholarship on writing instruction; discussion on the connections between history as a discipline and classroom writing assignments; and efforts to teach writing in a more coordinated, effective manner across all history courses. Most faculty revised their writing instruction in Gen Ed 120 accordingly.
 - ii. In 2004 grant awards from the College of Letters & Sciences and the LEARN CENTER funded additional summer workshops to further define and coordinate writing skills in History courses, as well as to create a writing assessment rubric to be integrated into assessment of the History program. These activities led many faculty to improve specific aspects of their writing instruction, especially those related to assessment, in their Gen Ed 120 sections.

- B. Faculty have increased comparative and non-U.S. content through the use of Nikki Mandell and Anthony Gulig, eds., *The United States in the Modern World: A Primary Source Reader* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2002). Created by two Gen Ed 120 instructors, the reader reflects the shift towards greater emphasis on twentieth century historical trends and events. (N.B. The reader was published during the previous self-study cycle but not included in the last report.)
- C. One History faculty member, Tony Gulig, participated in a Summer 2003 workshop with faculty from Global Perspectives aimed at new direct and indirect assessment instruments for Gen Ed 120 were designed during a summer workshop held in conjunction with Global Perspectives faculty in 2003.
- D. Staffing for Gen Ed 120 has evolved with the retirement of Dr. Jeanette Bohi after Spring 2004 and the hiring of Dr. Bert Kreitlow in Fall 2004. A specialist in 20th century Mexican history, Dr. Kreitlow offers new expertise from a modern Latin American perspective.
- E. In Spring 2005 a new series of Gen Ed 120 faculty meetings were held to consider ways to further coordinate and extend the initiative begun in the 2001–2002 self-study cycle to transform the course along the lines of a thematic 20th century World History course. Thus far there has been general agreement that all course instructors i) will choose any required textbooks from an approved list of 20th century world history texts; ii) contribute teaching materials (readings, primary documents) for dissemination and classroom use to a Gen Ed 120 Instructor’s site on D2L; and iii) refashion their courses around a common set of questions related to larger world developments, trends, and events.

3. Relationship of the Course to the mission of the University, the goals of General Education, and the objectives of the Core area

The U.S. Experience in a World Context aligns closely with the mission of the University Cluster Institutions to “offer a core of liberal studies that supports university degrees in the arts, letters, and sciences, as well as specialized professional/technical degrees at the associate and baccalaureate level.” (Goal “c” of the Mission statement) It is the only history course among the core offerings at UW-Whitewater and supports the University’s mission of providing “a core of liberal studies.”

In addition, the UW-Whitewater’s core values, mission statement, and objectives all emphasize the institution’s commitment to developing global perspectives and respect for diversity. The objectives of *The U.S. Experience in a World Context* also emphasize these same goals.

As one of the five core courses in the UWW curriculum, *The U.S. Experience in a World Context* forms an integral part of the UWW General Education program. The course helps students achieve the following **general goals** of general education:

- Think critically and analytically, integrate and synthesize knowledge, and draw conclusions from complex information.

- Understand and appreciate the cultures of the USA and other countries, both contemporary and historical, appreciate cultural diversity, and live responsibly in an interdependent world.
- Acquire a base of knowledge common to educated persons and the capacity to expand that base over their lifetime.

When *The US Experience in a World Context* was originally proposed in 1992, it was characterized as a one-semester survey of American history that would compare the U.S. experience to developments in other parts of the world. The **original course-specific objectives** of *Gen Ed 120* were:

- Compare and contrast the American experience to that of other cultures, and understand the American role in an interdependent world.
- Understand the sources of major characteristics of U.S. society and how they are distinctive from or similar to other societies'.
- Understand the gatherings of peoples and cultures from many countries that have contributed to the American heritage and to contemporary American society.
- Understand the evolution of American political and social democracy, its ideas, institutions, and the tension the ideals and the realities, with a comparison of the experiences of other nations.
- Understand the changing role of the U.S. in the world, the connection between domestic affairs and foreign policy, and American interactions with other nations and regions.

Since the inception of the core curriculum, the *U.S. Experience in a World Context* has evolved significantly. The most important change came in 2000 when students began choosing between *Gen Ed 120* and *140* in completing the core curriculum. In response to this change, a joint *Global Perspectives – U. S. Experience* workshop was held in Summer 2003 (in which one History faculty member participated). The workshop participants proposed the following **revised course-specific objectives** of *Gen Ed 120* in order to better reflect the commonalities between the two courses:

- Understand the gatherings of peoples and cultures from many countries that have contributed to the American heritage and to contemporary American society.
- Understand the origins of international problems and the changing role of the U.S. in the world.
- Compare political and economic systems and their effects on international relations and U.S. foreign policy.

It should be noted that these revised course-specific objectives were never formally ratified by History faculty and that most instructors have not significantly modified their syllabi or approach to *Gen Ed 120* since 2000.

4. Common Themes, Topics and Texts

Since the last GERC review in 2003, the *U.S. Experience* instructors have made significant progress in making the common goals and objectives of the core course clearer to students. The course-specific objectives were listed prominently on the syllabi of all but one of

this year's instructors. The instructor-specific objectives as well usually emphasize the goal of providing a comparative framework for understanding U.S. history in relation to global patterns. In addition, most instructors highlight improvement of thinking and writing skills as a central goal of the course. However, a closer look at these syllabi also reveals that substantial differences exist across sections, particularly in whether the instructor emphasizes the "U.S. experience" or the "world context" in her/his teaching (in other words, whether the course is fundamentally a course about American or world history). There is also significant variation in the chronological scope of the *U.S. Experience*: some instructors cover historical developments since the 18th century while others focus exclusively on the past ~125 years.

As noted earlier in this self-study, this core course was originally conceived as covering the whole sweep of U.S. history from the colonial period to the present. Almost all instructors have shifted to a more modern focus, and most devote at least 2/3 of the semester to tracing changes in the U.S. and the world since the 1870s. This time frame thus provides the core of common topics that all *Gen Ed 120* instructors cover including imperialism, economic modernization, the global impacts of wars and economic depression, the rise of communism and fascism, the emergence of the U.S. as a global power, and globalization. However, course instructors differ, sometimes substantially, in where they begin their course in history. Some instructors range back to colonial and revolutionary periods in order to trace the sources of American social and political exceptionalism while other instructors have essentially devised a 20th century course (noting that the "opening act" of the 20th century actually began around 1880). Different periodization schemes are also evident across sections.

Over half of the active instructors have adopted the two books currently in the Textbook rental system for *Gen Ed 120*. One is the custom reader developed by Profs. Nikki Mandell and Anthony Gulig, *The United States in the Modern World: A Primary Source Reader* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2001) for use in the course. The other text is a collection of historical essays entitled *America Compared: American History in International Perspective* (edited by Carl Guarnari). Other instructors still use material from the previous edition of the custom reader or have students buy an American history textbook, which they use either in conjunction with other materials or as a stand-alone text.

5. Collaboration Within and Between Departments

The *U.S. Experience in a World Context* is taught entirely within the History Department. It is one of two courses (the other being *Global Perspectives*) that students may choose to fulfill Part 2 of the "Communities" General Education Requirement. Therefore, most collaboration occurs within the History Department among the faculty who teach *U.S. Experience in a World Context*. While this is the only core course that is not multi-disciplinary in structure, the scope of historical knowledge required to teach about both the United States and other parts of the world is considerable. Therefore it is a course that can benefit substantially from collaboration among specialists in different areas of history.

Currently, the most significant collaborative efforts are the frequent, although informal, communications between and among the *U.S. Experience* faculty. Faculty members often share new course materials, assignments, and information on teaching methods. Over time, this has resulted in increasing consistency across many sections of the course. In addition, new *Gen Ed 120* instructors are mentored by experienced faculty, also assuring the same result. In the past, there have been more formal collaborations, most notably a multi-year team-teaching experiment which paired an American historian (Steve Karges) with a specialist in

Russian and European history (Liz Hachten). But at the moment, there are no ongoing formal collaborations in the department.

Since *Global Perspectives* and *U.S. Experience* were made alternative choices within the core curriculum, some collaborative efforts involving faculty in the two courses have been undertaken. In June and August of 2003, Anthony Gulig (representing the *U.S. Experience* instructors) met with *Global Perspectives* faculty in an effort to harmonize course goals and learning objectives between the *U.S. Experience* and *Global Perspectives* courses. Meetings later that year also provided a forum for discussing common concerns related to these two courses. These efforts resulted in the creation of shared direct and indirect assessment instruments that are now being used in both courses (see the Section 6 below).¹

Also in late summer 2003, one *U.S. Experience* instructor, Liz Hachten, participated in a joint workshop for the purpose of developing course units on topics relating to Communist and Post-Communist Eurasia. (See the *Global Perspectives* Self-Study Report for further details). The positive results of these workshops suggest that the two groups should strive to find ways to continue such exchanges.

6. Assessment

Until recently, assessment of student performance in the *U.S. Experience* course has been primarily conducted by each instructor within her/his own sections. Among the assessment techniques used are written in-class essay examinations, a combination of essay/objective examinations, papers written outside of class, and reports on required attendance at selected university and college-sponsored events. Instructors have shared the results of their course embedded-assessments informally. There appears to be a strong consensus that students generally leave *Gen Ed 120* with a much stronger sense of the connections between the past and contemporary events and feel better informed about their grasp of world events generally.

In addition, the History Department's recent writing workshops (Summer 2003 and 2004) have provided a forum for more formal discussion of how to improve student writing in history courses at all levels of the curriculum. These workshops have had a significant impact on the classroom practices of many of the *Gen Ed 120* instructors, for example as evidenced by the increased use of informal writing assignments in many sections of the course.

During the 2004-2005 academic year, we launched a more systematic, two-pronged approach to the assessment of student learning outcomes in *Gen Ed 120*. Student learning is now being assessed indirectly by gauging student perceptions of how well the course had helped them to achieve the stated learning objectives. In addition, direct assessment is being carried out through a pre- and post-course test that was developed jointly with *Global Perspectives*. The test consists of six questions taken from the 2002 National Geographic-Roper Literacy Survey and a reading passage (with four accompanying comprehension questions) taken from an essay by Thomas Friedman in the *Gen Ed 120* custom reader.

¹ See Anne Hamilton's "Joint Report for 'Global Perspectives' and 'U.S. Experience in a World Context' to the General Education Review Committee, Spring 2003 (February 2003). TMs.

Results of Indirect Assessments

The results of the indirect assessments administered during the 2004-05 academic year are contained in Appendices 1 and 2, below. The data for all sections are combined, and for the most part students were not directed to include the name of their instructor on the evaluation form. (In the future, we plan to also breakdown the results by instructor.) It should be noted that the Fall 2004 instrument listed the original course objectives for *U.S. Experience*; in the Spring semester the newly revised course objectives were listed on the assessment form.

Overall, the results for this assessment appear positive. The numeric scores seem to indicate that, on average, students agreed that they had attained each of the listed objectives.

It is also readily apparent that the average numeric scores declined in the second semester. It may be that the rewording of the objectives is playing a role in this shift. Alternatively, one might hypothesize that these results would normally be expected to be lower for Spring than Fall semesters. This is the pattern with student evaluations of instructors generally (fall is typically higher). Some of this seasonal variance may also be related to the fact that the worldviews of freshmen students taking Gen Ed 120 in the spring had been leavened by their first semester in university courses generally; many instructors have also noted that incoming freshmen tend to be more positive about their learning experience at UWW than those who've been here a semester, who are also more likely to resent taking required courses.

A further analysis of the responses tabulated seemed to be warranted and indeed has proved quite revealing. Out of the 127 students who completed the assessment instrument, 105 agreed or strongly agreed that they had achieved at least 4 of the 6 objectives and were neutral regarding the remaining objectives. Only 22 students out of the 127 total students registered even one negative response, disagreeing that they had achieved one or more of the stated objectives. Unfortunately, we do not have a breakdown of responses for the Fall semester, but the Spring results seem to point to the impact of a relatively small minority of disaffected students on the average numeric scores. In future semesters it might be worthwhile to ask students about their anticipated grade and perceived level of effort in the course as part of this assessment process.

Results of Direct Assessments

The following table summarizes the preliminary results of the first administration of the pre- and post-course test during the Spring 2005 semester (these results are incomplete as only half of the instructors had administered the post-test as of May 3). Note that questions 1-6 are identical on the pre-and post-tests; questions 7-10 relate to different passages from the same essay so they are not directly comparable.

ITEM NUMBER	% CORRECT PRE-TEST (N=285)	% CORRECT POST-TEST (N=127)
1 (major powers/Cold War)	77.9	79.5
2 (colonizers of Africa)	57.9	67.7
3 (Oil-exporting region)	94.4	94.5
4 (communist state in WH)	79.6	85.8
5 (population >1 billion)	56.5	63.8
6 (UN Security Council)	36.1	42.5
7 (Friedman passage)	62.5	16.5
8 (Friedman passage)	14	53.5
9 (Friedman passage)	70.9	51.2
10 (Friedman passage)	57.2	52.0
MEAN SCORE	6.07	6.07

We hesitate to draw any firm conclusions from this data until results from all sections have been analyzed. It is difficult to know what to make of the apparent lack of improvement in student performance on this test over the course of the semester. Does it reflect a disappointing lack of learning or inadequacies in the assessment instrument? Should we be focus on changing our teaching methods or our assessment techniques, or both? These are questions that the *U.S. Experience* and *Global Perspectives* instructors will have to answer in the coming months.

7. Concerns

- **Large class sizes and high student loads continue to be a significant burden for instructors.** Fall course enrollments have remained steady at 40-45 students per section for the last few years (slightly lower in the spring). This is a particular concern since the discipline of history is grounded in methods of inquiry and analysis that require substantial writing as an integral part of the learning process. In addition, History Department guidelines mandate that all 100-level history courses include substantial writing experiences (essay exams, papers, etc.). Current class sizes do not make it possible for History faculty to adequately prepare students to write well and to evaluate, comment on, and grade student writing. As a result, History faculty are concerned that the University is not allocating sufficient resources to ensure that students can be taught (and thus can learn) essential skills of critical analysis and writing that are at the heart of general education.
- **Significant variations in course focus, scope, and materials continue to exist across instructors and sections of the course.** Some sections of *Gen Ed 120* still reflect the original conception of the course as a one-semester American history survey with a comparative cast while other sections have come more to resemble a 20th century world history survey. While we are all committed to maintaining a high degree of flexibility for instructors, it is also important that the course's basic framework be consistent across sections and instructors. More opportunities for formal instructional collaboration (through team teaching or the development of common instructional materials) would also help address this need.
- **Staffing the History core course continues to be a challenge on several levels.** A decade ago, the *U.S. Experience* was taught almost exclusively by specialists in

American history, who made up $\frac{3}{4}$ of the History faculty. But since then the History department has lost three faculty lines in American history. This downsizing has meant that the History department continues to struggle to balance the need to offer sufficient seats in the core course while maintaining other general education and major offerings. In addition, it is now clear that Americanists can no longer exclusively carry the burden of teaching the *U.S. Experience* course. But the course's title and long-standing American focus makes it an unappealing and challenging course to other historians in the department. This has become a recruitment issue as well since candidates for positions in fields like East Asian history do not feel qualified to teach an "American" history course.

- **The long-standing efforts to refocus the *U.S. Experience* into a 20th century world history course have stalled in recent years.** The staffing issues mentioned above, as well as the recent revision in the core curriculum that paired *Gen Ed 120* with *Global Perspectives*, have only served to underline the need to "internationalize" the History core course and refocus it on 20th century themes and topics. Efforts along these lines date back to 1998 but the process of revision is still incomplete at this time. The advantages of recasting *Gen Ed 120* as a 20th century world history course will be considerable, including better alignment with *Global Perspectives* and a readier supply of course-appropriate texts, instructional materials, and conceptual frameworks. But significant barriers remain. The current Gen Ed 120 instructors are mostly specialists in American history who need support for professional development to broaden their knowledge of other regions of the world and become acquainted with theoretical and pedagogical issues in modern world history. In addition, it should be noted that the department lacks specialists in important fields such as Middle Eastern and world history. The process of professional development would be much smoother if we had this in-house expertise.
- **While an assessment program has been launched, it still needs considerable refinement and continued implementation.** The assessment process (especially direct assessment of student learning outcomes) should be reviewed and possibly revised; in addition, assessment results need to be incorporated into the process of course review and revision.

8. NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The process of reconfiguring Gen Ed 120 into a globally focused, twentieth century history course must be completed.** As part of this process, guidelines should be developed to ensure consistency in the course framework and themes across sections. These guidelines must be flexible enough to allow instructors to teach from their strengths (i.e., American, European, Asian, Latin American or African history) while striving for a global perspective that also incorporates significant coverage of the U.S. role in the world. Thanks to Larry Schuetz and the College of Letters and Sciences, all the *Gen Ed 120* instructors will be participating in a three-day workshop this summer focused specifically on achieving these goals.
- **The *Gen Ed 120* course title and objectives should be revised to reflect the changes described above.** We plan to submitted proposed revisions to GERC next year. Among the alternative course titles already under consideration are: *Historical Perspectives*, *Twentieth Century World (or Global) History*, *World History in the Twentieth Century*, *Major Events in the 20th Century World*, and *The U.S. in the 20th Century World* (minimal change, but suggests a world history framework).

- **Assessment procedures should be reviewed and revised as necessary to better measure important student learning outcomes.** During the summer 2005 we will explore the possibility of developing course-embedded assessment measures that are based on actual course work completed by students. A first step could be to ask for formal reports from instructors about their in-class assessment results. A second step in the process of course-embedded assessment would be to ask instructors to submit sample papers or exam essays that address one of the common course themes or topics. These samples would then be scored by a group of Gen Ed 120 instructors. A rubric that reflects the general course expectations for content knowledge, critical thinking, and writing would of course need to be developed to use in assessing student achievement in those areas.
- **Renew efforts to create more formal opportunities for collaborative teaching** in Gen Ed 120 (i.e., team teaching, joint development of course units or modules, etc.).
- **Pursue increased funding support and opportunities for professional development** for core course instructors.
- **Allow the History Department to recruit new faculty in high priority areas such as Middle Eastern and world history.**
- **Continue to press the administration for adequate resources for the general education program** so that class sizes can be reduced to levels that allow for more effective teaching and learning. Reductions in freshmen class sizes would also help achieve this same goal.

APPENDIX 1
Fall 2004 Indirect Assessment Instrument and Results

GENED 120: THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN A WORLD CONTEXT

Listed below are the general goals, or “learning objectives,” of this course. Please mark on your answer sheet the letter that most closely reflects your response to each statement, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”:

a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral (no opinion) d. disagree e. strongly disagree

This course has helped me to:

1. Think critically and analytically, integrate and synthesize knowledge, and draw conclusions from complex material
2. Understand and appreciate American and other cultures, both contemporary and historical, appreciate diversity, and live responsibly in an interdependent world
3. Acquire a base of knowledge common to educated persons
4. Compare and contrast the American experience to that of other cultures, and understand the American role in an interdependent world
5. Understand the sources of major characteristics of U.S. society and how they are distinctive from or similar to other societies’
6. Understand the gatherings of peoples and cultures from many countries that have contributed to the American heritage and to contemporary American society
7. Understand the evolution of American political and social democracy, its ideas, institutions, and the tension the ideals and the realities, with a comparison of the experiences of other nations
8. Understand the changing role of the U.S. in the world, the connection between domestic affairs and foreign policy, and American interactions with other nations and regions.

Objective 1: 2.05
Objective 2: 1.97
Objective 3: 1.93
Objective 4: 1.80
Objective 5: 1.94
Objective 6: 2.07
Objective 7: 1.89
Objective 8: 1.71

(N=223)

APPENDIX 2:
Spring 2005 Indirect Assessment Instrument and Results

GENED 120: THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN A WORLD CONTEXT

Listed below are the general goals, or “learning objectives,” of this course. Please mark on your answer sheet the letter that most closely reflects your response to each statement, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”:

a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral (no opinion) d. disagree e. strongly disagree

This course has helped me to:

1. Think critically and analytically, integrate and synthesize knowledge, and draw conclusions from complex material.
2. Understand and appreciate American and other cultures, both contemporary and historical, appreciate diversity, and live responsibly in an interdependent world.
3. Acquire a base of knowledge common to educated persons, and the capacity to expand that base over their lifetime.
4. Understand the gatherings of peoples and cultures from many countries that have contributed to the American heritage and to contemporary American society.
5. Understand the origins of international problems and the changing role of the U.S. in the world.
6. Compare political and economic systems and their effects on international relations and U.S. foreign policy.

Objective 1: 2.75

Objective 2: 2.25

Objective 3: 2.5

Objective 4: 2.125

Objective 5: 2.00

Objective 6: 2.25

(N=127)