


IN THE PUBLIC EYE

A new Department of History initiative is committed to making the value of a history degree easier to see and understand by contributing to the common good.

BY SUSAN HUTTON  JULIA LUBAS



DATE OF COMPLAINT *2-19-63*
TYPE OF CASE *Police, CIVIL*
NAME *Mr. Harold H. ...*
ADDRESS *...*
OCCUPATION *...*
AGE *...*
DATE OF INCIDENT *Dec 1*
ARREST *...*
SUMMARY *...*
NAME OF COMPLAINT *...*

UNIT *...*
OFFICER *...*
PHONE *...*

*Claimed she was ...
The girl was ...
blood pressure ...
The girl was ...
The girl was ...
The girl was ...*

DISPOSITION: _____
INTERVIEWED BY *...*



national conversations about higher education, humanities get a bad rap. As popular targets in the culture wars, they're derided for cultivating useless knowledge. It's a mischaracterization, but there is reason to be worried about the future. Since the Great Recession, humanities enrollments have fallen starkly. According to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, the humanities constitute about five percent of all conferred degrees—the fewest since 1949. This decline has sparked conversations on campuses across the country, and it has inspired LSA's Department of History to chart a different course with a new initiative called U-M History in the Public Service.

“We want to make an affirmative argument about why history matters,” says Professor of History and American Culture and Department of History Chair Jay Cook. “We want to push back against the devaluation of the humanities and mobilize the power of historical thinking and its potential to change lives. Historians have lost their place in the highest levels of public discourse, and we need to clearly communicate the work we do that contributes to the public good.”

The department has developed a new type of collaborative, project-based course it calls HistoryLabs. Rooted in publicly engaged scholarship, HistoryLabs are practicums in which students apply the knowledge and skills they’ve honed through their history courses to complex social problems. “They demonstrate—in the most concrete terms possible—the broader value of our research, expertise, and training,” Cook says.

The American Historical Association (AHA) bolstered the department initiative with early financial and institutional support. The initiative was also supported by a major gift from Catherine and Gary Andrejak in honor of Catherine’s father, former member of the history faculty Gerald Saxon Brown (1911–1999).

“We want HistoryLabs to arm our students with impressive dossiers. We want to make their skills legible and to effectively position them for multiple career paths beyond their degrees at U-M,” Cook says. “They may generate work that overturns convictions or contributes to the rapidly evolving body of immigration law. These are impacts that go way beyond saying a student wrote a great senior honors thesis or published a really good term paper in a history journal.”

The first two HistoryLab courses launched in fall 2018, but they originated in two large-format lecture classes from the winter before: “Crime and Drugs in Modern America,” taught by Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of History Matthew Lassiter; and “Immigration Law,” taught by Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, professor of history and American culture. The lecture courses laid much of the foundation on which Lassiter’s “Policing and Social Justice Lab” course and Hoffnung-Garskof’s “Immigration Law Research Clinic” course were built.

“My large lecture class covers the war on crime and the war on drugs in the twentieth century,”

Lassiter explains. “The majority of the students in my first lab course were recruited from that class. The scale of the lab’s work is so ambitious that it’s difficult to cover the background content they need to know. The lab is more about presenting the students with a question or a problem and having them investigate it.”



In his fall 2018 course, Lassiter’s students investigated police shootings of civilians in Detroit and the anti-police-brutality movement that emerged between 1957 and 1973. As they dug in, students were soon grappling with deeper questions that resonated with the Black Lives Matter Movement, too: How did policing work in the city of Detroit? How many people did the police kill?

In Detroit, the history of police violence is long. In the late 1950s, the large number of police brutality incidents against African Americans caused Detroit’s civil rights groups to demand a civilian review board. The county prosecutor had ruled, with one exception, that every police killing between 1957–1973 was justified. In a way, says Lassiter, the HistoryLab became the civilian review board itself.

“Police brutality and police killings of black people have faced more scrutiny these past few years than it has in my age group’s collective memory,” says LSA senior Mahal Stevens, a student in Lassiter’s HistoryLab. “And as with any current issue, it’s important to trace its history.”

“Our research was primarily conducted in archives,” explains LSA junior Jack Mahon. “A research project of this style hasn’t been produced to date, and most likely would not have surfaced without the work of this lab. By creating a concrete history of police violence and racial injustice in Detroit, we present key resources for progress in criminal justice reform.”

“It could be tedious,” admits LSA senior Jamie Murray, “but going through all the information was crucial.” She was struck by police complaints filed 50 years ago. “The language they used to describe police behavior was so similar to many of the cases we hear about today.”

The students collected their findings and presented them on a website, which included an interactive map of Detroit that recorded where police-civilian encounters happened. The encounters are recorded in different colors to distinguish them by type, e.g., a killing is marked with one color, an assault with another. The locations are recorded on historical maps because many neighborhoods were destroyed when interstate highways were built.

African Americans are disproportionately the targets of police violence, and one explanation is the community violence hypothesis. The hypothesis posits that because black neighborhoods typically have higher crime rates, police spend more time patrolling and interrupting crimes in these neighborhoods, which results in more violent incidents.

DETROIT
POINTS OF
INTEREST.

Key Witness At Hearing



STOP POLICE BRUTALITY!

STREETS.

KEY WITNESSES during Trial
Michael...
Bob...
...



JOIN THE M...
ON THE
7th PREC...
TO FOLLOW PICKET



DETROIT POLICE HEADQUARTERS

But Lassiter says the lab's maps reveal something surprising: Most police shootings didn't happen in the neighborhoods with the highest crime or poverty rates. They happened in white neighborhoods, in the midtown corridor, or on the racial color line.

The lab hopes this and other findings will provide a community resource and, in some cases, help to correct the record, too.

"There are people whose relatives were classified as criminals at their death. Our research shows that some of them died as a result of police misconduct," Lassiter says. "That's not true in all cases, of course. There's a broad spectrum of things that happened, but I think we've researched several specific cases, such as the case of sex worker Cynthia Scott who was killed by police, that might merit official apologies."

SECURING ASYLUM

Even when it's not the focus of a presidential administration, immigration law is often in flux, as are the groups that are eligible for asylum. To make an asylum claim, you need well-documented evidence that you will face persecution if you return to your country of origin — persecution that meets a specific legal definition. You might have scars, medical or police records, or a threatening letter, but you are only eligible for asylum if you can show a well-founded fear that you'll be targeted again because of your race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. A successful asylum application requires objective evidence about conditions in your community of origin: the existence of your social group, general persecution against members of that group, and the failure of your government to protect members of the group. This is the kind of research that students in Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof's HistoryLab are trained to do.

Hoffnung-Garskof wondered if his students could research and write up the legal evidence that courts use to establish grants of asylum. Working in partnership with the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC), a local nonprofit organization that provides pro bono legal services to immigrants, students began to research and compile data MIRC's lawyers could use to file asylum cases.

Working with individual, anonymized cases, the lab identified and assembled the materials MIRC's lawyers requested for cases focused on unaccompanied minors. "We were responsible for background research for various asylum cases," explains Jesse Yeh, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology. "The lawyers sent us basic facts about the case and the broad questions that needed research support. We also responded to specific questions that the lawyers had."

People seeking asylum frequently come from the same places, and, not surprisingly, they're often fleeing from the same persecutions. Of the 14 undergraduate students in Hoffnung-Garskof's lab, 11 had also taken

"WE'VE TRIED TO CREATE AN AFFIRMATIVE ARGUMENT ABOUT WHY HISTORY MATTERS," SAYS PROFESSOR JAY COOK. "THAT DEMONSTRATES — IN THE MOST CONCRETE TERMS POSSIBLE — THE BROADER VALUE OF OUR RESEARCH, EXPERTISE, AND TRAINING."



“AT U-M, WE WERE TRAINED TO WRITE ESSAYS AND THINK ANALYTICALLY,” SAYS LSA SENIOR SAFIA SAYED, “BUT THIS LAB REQUIRED WE LEARN TO THINK AND WRITE FOR A SPECIFIC, PRACTICAL CONTEXT.”

his immigrant law lecture class last winter. One student had expertise in database technology, so when two graduate students and a library science intern added their skills to the pot, the lab was poised to start building a country conditions database for use in future asylum cases.

Once they found the material, they tagged it by country or region; by gender, sexual orientation, ethnic group, or race; or by the nature of a crime. But effectively identifying such information requires more than research skills. It also relies on understanding the history of northern Central America, where most of MIRC’s cases come from, in order to provide the proper context. Having access to material written in different languages was also essential, and the lab worked with LSA’s Language Resource Center to build a network of volunteer translators with expertise in Latin American studies.

Though it’s still under construction, the database has reached a prototype phase. The students

continue to refine their research while being careful to be consistent. They hope to fill the database with rubrics of information that can be easily found and used in cases that are filed around the country.

“If someone looks in the database by gender or indigenous status, they can check those boxes and, hopefully, our research will pop up,” explains LSA senior Safia Sayed. “The whole idea underlying the database is that once a piece of information has been identified as useful in establishing a particular social group, then every lawyer should be able to access that same piece of information. That work shouldn’t need to be done over and over.”

“We have gotten to work with MIRC attorneys to figure out how could this work,” says LSA senior Yezenia Sandoval. She also notes that they must continue to scrutinize new information they find to detect similarities in individual cases and establish a country or region’s broader patterns.

The stakes were different from typical work in humanities classes. “When we found something that was particularly horrible, we got excited,” says LSA senior Sophia Lusk. “We’d say, ‘Oh, this gang has been terrifying this specific neighborhood! That’s perfect!’ We were excited because we had this source, which could help our client, but the excitement also felt strange and misplaced.”

“We were doing something real with history and making an impact on children’s lives,” Sayed says. “At U-M, we were trained to write essays and think analytically, but the lab required we learn to think and write for a specific, practical context.”



The U-M History in the Public Service Initiative considers the situation of its graduate

students, too. As the history department’s then director of graduate studies, Rita Chin, history professor and current associate dean for social sciences at Rackham, convened a group of faculty and students at U-M to explore the ways that transferable skills and public service could be further integrated into the graduate curriculum.

Out of those discussions, Chin and Jeffrey Veidlinger, Joseph Brodsky Collegiate Professor of History and Judaic Studies, developed a graduate-level HistoryLab, which launched in the winter 2019 semester. Partnering with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, two teams of LSA graduate students are working to create two collections for the museum’s *Experiencing History* online teaching tool: a comparative fascism exhibit and an exhibit that examines what Americans knew about the Holocaust while it was happening, about American anti-Semitism, and about support for Nazi Germany.

“The students – many of whom have no training in Holocaust history – are learning how to apply their research and analytic skills to unfamiliar topics,” Chin says, “and they are learning to communicate complicated historical arguments to audiences beyond academia.”

“Since the Holocaust museum is an independent establishment of the United States government operating as a public-private partnership, there are a whole bunch of stakeholders involved,” Veidlinger explains. “Students are not accustomed to negotiating what to say with different groups of people, but that’s very much what public historians do.

“Typically, we encourage our students to find something new, to be creative and original,” he continues. “This work is very different. Here we’re trying to teach them to reach a common view, to present something that everybody – including the United States government – can say is accurate, to articulate a consensus viewpoint.”

Part of the AHA grant the department won to develop its public service initiative included a provision for a career diversity fellow – a graduate student or a postdoc who absorbs some of the administrative work implicit in developing such a program and gains valuable administrative experience while doing it. The department hired Ph.D. student Matt Villeneuve as its first career diversity fellow. He believes non-academic audiences change the story you tell, and he sees the department’s openness to shifting its perspective as a significant change.

“My generation grew up understanding you can transmit rigorous ideas through different mediums,” he says. “We know you can do really robust scholarship through a podcast or a documentary. For a long time, if you wanted to hang in the academy, your ticket was a formal dissertation, which might realistically have an audience of as few as a dozen experts in the field. Demonstrating your expertise to your colleagues is important, but that kind of presentation just isn’t really satisfying anymore.” Villeneuve sees the value in addressing such a narrow, specific audience, but he also sees its risks.

“My dad is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe of North Dakota,” he says, “and I work on Native American history, particularly around education. One thing that comes up in my work is the damage that so-called experts can do to people who are historically excluded from centers of knowledge production.

“Listening to diverse groups of people makes us better historians,” he concludes. “I think that’s the larger value.” ■