

Learning Communities and Assessment for Freshmen History Majors

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Author Biographies

After earning his PhD in History in 1990 at the University of Connecticut, Barney Rickman accepted a tenure track appointment at Valdosta State University. A historian of U.S.-Japanese diplomatic relations, Dr. Rickman has published in the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* as well as the *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians*. In 2006, Dr. Rickman was awarded Valdosta State's Excellence in Teaching Award, and he received Valdosta State's Excellence in Advising Award in 2010. In July 2019, Dr. Rickman began service as the Interim Head of the History Department at VSU.

Melanie Byrd, originally from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, earned BA and MA degrees in History from the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio as well as a MLIS from Kent State University in Ohio. She received her PhD in History from Florida State University in 1992, and has been a History professor at Valdosta State University since 1993. Dr. Byrd teaches ancient, world, and European history, plus the senior seminar, in which library research is an integral part.

Deborah Davis is a Certified Archivist, a Full Professor, and the Director of the Valdosta State University Archives and Special Collections. She also teaches for the VSU's MLIS Department and the VSU History Department. As an archivist, Ms. Davis focuses on teaching, reference, outreach, and administration. In 2018 she was awarded the VSU President's Award for Service Excellence. She has also won awards from the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board, the Consortium for Belize Educational Cooperation, and the African American studies program at VSU. Ms. Davis is the author of several articles and a book, *Valdosta State University* (2001).

In 2008, the History faculty at Valdosta State University (VSU) implemented a first-year learning community to improve retention and academic success within our major. Starting fall 2019, incoming History majors were encouraged to take a course designed specifically for students beginning a major in History. The class, "Archive/Library for Historians," was team-taught by Professors Melanie Byrd (History) and Deborah Davis (VSU Archives) and could be used for credit in Area B of the Core Curriculum. The course number was PERS 2299 as all Area B classes at VSU have the PERS designation. Of the twelve freshman students who identified as planning to major in History, eight were able to fit PERS 2299 into their fall schedule; time conflicts with team practice prevented several student athletes from enrolling in the class.

A key learning outcome for PERS 2299 was to introduce first-year students to the use of libraries and archives, with an emphasis on historical research and analysis. By the end of the class, each student produced a term paper (5-7 pages) based on archival research on a topic connected to the Civil Rights Era; each student was also required to present the results of their research and analysis to the class. Course assignments early in the term involved exercises in how to frame a research question, how to find materials, how to determine an author's thesis, and an introduction to the concept of historiography.

The History faculty hope that this new class will help our majors be better prepared for the sophomore-year History 3000: Study of History. All majors take History 3000 as, or concurrently with, their first upper-division history course. This course provides students with further background on the discipline of history and the skills (research, analysis, writing, and discussion) essential to historical study and all upper-division courses in the major. Students complete the major with History 4950: Senior Seminar. The Senior Seminar

measures student progress in the mastery of oral and written communication as well as the acquisition of skills in critical analysis and historical interpretation.

Course evaluation comments demonstrate that PERS 2299 achieved its objectives for some students. “This course taught me how to complete research correctly and dig deeper into information.” “The best feature was getting a tour of the archives and the library. Another great feature was getting to use the archives in class.” Two of the PERS 2299 students, moreover, had their term papers accepted for the 2020 Georgia Collegiate Honor’s Council conference⁴ (Georgia Collegiate Honor’s Council Conference, 2020).

In spring 2020, the retention rate for PERS 2299 students was 88%. This data is consistent with the fall term to spring term retention rate for History majors in recent years⁵ but what will be interesting is if there is an increase in the six-year graduation rate as these PERS 2299 students progress toward graduation. For the cohorts who started VSU in fall 2012 and fall 2013, the 6-year graduation rate for History majors averaged around 50% which was above the general VSU 6-year graduation rate of 42% for fall 2012 and just below the USG System graduation rate of 52% for fall 2012⁶.

Professors Byrd and Davis plan to revise the course for fall 2020. The PERS 2299 course structure relied heavily on a scaffolding approach in which each assignment early in the term built skills for success in the term paper at the end of the semester, but this structure was undermined when freshmen students missed class. Students who missed a number of classes early in the fall struggled on the term paper since they did not complete the earlier skill-building assignments. Prior to fall 2020, Professors Byrd and Davis will restructure the class so that first-year students have greater incentives to attend class as well as arrive to class with the assigned readings completed.

Dr. Byrd has also chaired the Department’s Assessment Committee for almost two decades. She played a key role in creating (and revising) the assessment instruments used in HIST 3000 and 4950, and she incorporated an assessment process in PERS 2299 as well. Specifically, along with Ms. Davis, Dr. Byrd created a pre-test for PERS 2299 that introduced the students to some of the key concepts they would learn in the course -- concepts that would help them achieve greater academic success in their later History courses.

The multiple-choice PERS 2299 pre-test included questions such as

1. What is a primary source?
 - a) the main source that an historian uses in research
 - b) a source based on careful, detailed historical analysis
 - c) a firsthand source that was originally produced during the period that an historian is researching
2. What is a secondary source?
 - a) a source produced after the time period that an historian is researching
 - b) information found in an archive
 - c) the second most important source that an historian uses
3. What is a tertiary source?
 - a) a non-print source such as a film or painting
 - b) a source produced more than a century after the events that it discusses
 - c) a source that condenses or indexes other sources, such as an encyclopedia

⁴ <https://www.mga.edu/georgia-collegiate-honors-council/index.php>

⁵ <http://www.valdosta.edu/administration/institutional-research/>

⁶ https://www.valdosta.edu/administration/institutional-research/documents/enrollment-graduation-retention/retention_graduation_2018.pdf

4. A concise summary of the main assertion or argument presented in a piece of historical research, found near the introduction or beginning of the piece of research is called:

- a) a thesis statement
- b) historical evidence
- c) an abstract

5. What is historiography?

- a) study of the history, theory, philosophy, and interpretations of history
- b) use of in-person interviews in historical research
- c) research that examines social interactions and cultural values of a given era

Although we cannot predict the outcome of the current process of Core Curriculum revision within the USG, the History faculty at Valdosta State University see the course created by Professors Byrd and Davis as a central component of improving the academic success of our majors.