The Almost Nonexistent History of Academic Departments

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Last spring a large group of historians, aspiring and experienced alike, gathered in Princeton’s department of history for a set of lively panel discussions about the department’s post-World War II history, its present situation, and its possible future. Because few departments in any discipline have taken an institutional interest in preserving and understanding their own pasts, a workshop about its own history immediately distinguished the Princeton department from most other history departments. But what invites particular note in this instance is that the workshop’s organizers were not members of the department’s faculty but instead a group of the department’s graduate students.

Those students’ interest in their department’s history originated in a chance realization that, though students of the past, they were ignorant of the past of the very institution in which they were preparing to become professional historians. That discovery occurred when one of them happened across a 1987 New York Times article on “The Hot History Department,” a lively if lopsided and seriously incomplete account of one of the most influential groups of historians then practicing at an American university: The irony of fledgling historians not knowing much about the historical context of their own training was not lost on those students. But it seems to be an irony that had also long escaped the members of the department who were directing their students.

I, too, had done nothing to further the written record of my own department, nor had I made any effort to introduce my graduate students to the history of the particular departmental culture they had entered. Unfortunately, the charge of inattention to department histories can validly be leveled against most other historians. For while you would think that historians, of all people, would take an interest in the history of their own institutions—in the history of the departments in which they practice, in the preservation and interpretation of that history, and in such matters as the traditions that form and sustain their collective approach to preparing others—they rarely do so. At least they rarely do so in a way that would prove useful to the advancement of knowledge, to the preparation of their students, and to the orientation of those who succeed them as members of their departments. But more is at stake here than the absence of histories of history departments. In fact, we have almost no histories of any academic departments, most significantly of the great ones in the major disciplines. That fact, the reasons for it, and some suggestions as to what might be done to alter the situation are the subject of what follows.

Academics are practiced in, sometimes champions of, gossip. They nourish themselves on intramural disputes, on information about their colleagues, on battles over appointments. Their inability to capture and preserve those memories can be found in the written histories of particular colleges and universities. The history of education and of educational institutions has not been foremost among any of those, nor has been the kind of intellectual history that might have grown out of it (the history of academic thought, for example). Academic biographies and memoirs, as well as histories of discrete colleges and universities, have been left to carry much of the weight of academic history, but few of these reveal much about the departments in which their authors have served. Department histories are almost nowhere to be found.

Why this is so is not hard to discern. Institutional history has been at a general discount in recent decades. The history of education has never found a strong place in history departments. Those aspiring historians seeking entry to graduate programs, even those with a nascent interest in the history of education, have not been without good sense in defining their interests to graduate program admissions committees as being, say, in the social history of ideas or, say, in the history of the social composition of academic faculties or student cohorts if they have a general interest in academic institutions. Those of their mentors who might wish it were otherwise, who would like to see students pursue the history of academic departments—and there are a few, even if very few, of these—have found it a losing game to try to attract their students to such subjects. It is thus a distinctive and hardy student who proposes to undertake a dissertation on the history of a university department in any discipline.

Two other forces are at work against the pursuit of departmental histories. One is the simple fact that institutions do not have memories; only their members and employees do. If faculty members fail to take an interest in their histories, academic departments are not likely to be the subject of institutional histories. The histories of departments are carried within their members’ memories, not within the institutions themselves; once their members resign or retire, the history they embody leaves the department with them. Only concerted efforts to capture and preserve those memories can avail.

But a second reality working against department histories is the disposition of most faculty members toward their own departments and colleagues. Academics are practiced in, sometimes champions of, gossip. They nourish themselves on intramural disputes, on information about their colleagues, on battles over appointments. That is generally all to the good, for if kept within collegial bounds, gossip and inside information are constituent parts of the equilibrating mechanisms of all institutions. But in this case, private knowledge gained and imparted through gossip stands in for formal historical knowledge and is not recorded or caught on paper or tape as a resource for formal future histories unless it happens to be set down in personal correspondence or diaries that find themselves into library collections. If not, that knowledge is allowed to vanish into air and thus be of no use to future historians.

This does not however mean that nothing is available to those who might be interested in the histories of individual departments. Some information can be found in the written histories of particular colleges and universities. But those seeking knowledge of particular segments of those institutions, especially of their constituent academic departments, are at a serious disadvantage. One can, for instance, tease out some of the history of the University of Wisconsin’s history department from David S. Brown’s Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and of the Berkeley history department from Albert L. Hurta’s Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands (University of California Press, 2012) The Berkeley department is also one of the very few to have something that can be said to constitute a sketch of its history in Gene A. Brucker, Henry F. May, and David A. Hollinger’s three lectures, collected in His-
The best oral history requires adherence to demanding ethical standards. These elements—knowledge, practice, and ethics—ought by now to constitute part of every history graduate student’s preparation. Why not apply at least part of that preparation to the capture of a department’s history? There should be exit interviews with retiring and departing faculty members of the sort done with departing senior corporate and government officials as well as retrospective interviews, some years later, of the same people. And why not exit interviews of graduate students themselves?

Why don’t departments routinely encourage their members to retain their files and correspondence and to deposit them with their institutions? The yield could be enormous as well as captivating, as shown by Peter Novick’s use of such collections in his classic *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). It would also be no mere trifle were departments to improve their own efforts toward their alumni, both faculty members and students. Graduate students have a wealth of impressions, information, and knowledge to impart to the historical record, as do former faculty members. It would be fitting for departments to keep track of them. Departments are not known for doing a good job on either score, although they can be excused for not wanting to add yet another task, that of alumni relations, to their already taxed staffs. Yet any department interested in preserving its history will want to be as inclusive as possible in doing so.

The Princeton students’ interest in the history of their department that occasions these reflections ought to serve as a proxy for all historians concerned with the history of their discipline, their institutions, and their intellectual culture. If their initiative, for which they should be applauded, can spur the rest of us to undertake what we might long ago have undertaken, they will have inaugurated a new field of research as well as a new phase in the history of history, as well as of many other disciplines, in the United States.