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Some Reflections on De-specialization at a Small Graduate Program

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As someone at a relatively small graduate program, I have witnessed firsthand the effects of de-specialization. Because our program is too small to sustain colloquia on French history, students take broad thematic courses with their cohort while learning specialized topics in independent studies. As the Tallahassee Report revealed, what has materialized at our university is part of a broader trend. We have hired several faculty who focus on transnational and global approaches in their scholarly work. Consequently, our students, particularly in early modern history, have the advising support to craft and complete dissertation projects that incorporate regional and global approaches. They are on the front lines of teaching and imagining the early modern world in less insular, more interconnected ways. They have responded enthusiastically to seminars and reading lists that integrate into historical analyses of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, scholarship on environmental and climate change, technological transfers from Asia to Europe, histories of migration, renegadism and Mediterranean world slavery. Given the new scholarship on the Age of Exploration, Mediterranean encounters, and the Indian Ocean world, our students are well versed in the histories of circulation, whether of ideas, people, or things, that debunk Euro-centric formulations. My students have been so instrumental in helping me refine my research on Franco-Persian trade, and clarifying the ways in which developments between the Fronde and the First French Empire in the Atlantic and Caribbean connected to French activities in the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean world.

However, I find that the benefits of this trend—original research that focuses attention on previously neglected historical actors, regions, and cross-national interactions—can come at a steep cost. Senior, junior, and non-tenure-track faculty can take on extra teaching and advising to ensure that their students receive specialized content. “Global” topics require training in more languages and time for archival research. Combined with their course requirements and teaching assistant responsibilities, students have limited opportunities to master several languages and conduct research outside of the country. Unless students independently find the means, they cannot buy out time from teaching assistantships for archiving trips, or continue in the program beyond their funded years to complete their dissertations. This puts immense pressure on them to devise ways to patch together funding, which in turn puts more strains on their research time. They can substitute on-site archiving with digital resources. Rather than spend a year or more living in France and in other locations relevant to their projects, they can take short research trips to photograph 10,000 document images. But it is not good practice to send into the job market European historians who have spent less than a semester living in, and learning about, their country of specialization.

I am very torn about our disciplinary trends. As a faculty of color in early modern French history (Asian-American, first-generation college student, and formerly an undocumented immigrant for much of my childhood), I very much appreciate the opportunities we now have to stress the interconnected themes that I truly believe attract more ethnically, culturally, and socially diverse students into our undergraduate and graduate courses. In order to show our students that our field can resonate with them, we need to teach in ways that dispel the assumption that early modern French history is “white people history.” Because, in many ways, early modern French history is more relevant than ever. In an age when we witness the re-emergence of illiberal ideas and the politics of exclusion, it is our responsibility to cultivate in our students an understanding of the complex, diverse, messy and interconnected early modern world out of which our present political vocabularies—both their humanitarian and egalitarian ideals, as well as their exclusionary potentials—arose.

As current director of undergraduate studies, I have made outreach, particularly to under-represented, under-privileged undergraduate students and potential graduate students, my chief focus. But whatever paths forward we take, we need to think carefully and responsibly about how to support such students in academic careers where they are still a minority. If being a graduate student is already demoralizing in these hard times, it is even more so for students who feel culturally isolated, shoulder personal and familial financial burdens, or take on extensive service and activism at very early points in their careers. While de-specialization has had the effect of making our teaching and content more inclusive, the institutional blocks to equitable and inclusive professional development are still very much present.

To end on a positive note, I would like to share some ways in which our students and institution have responded to current developments. First, our department is pouring much energy into our fully-funded MA History Program. It serves as a stepping stone for students from diverse undergraduate institutions. It effectively gives students the opportunity to take two years to learn languages, take courses in historiography and methods, and get an early start in developing future dissertation projects so they are in strong standing to apply to doctoral programs. It also allows students the time to think carefully about whether they want to continue in academia, or concurrently take courses, for example, in museum studies, education, or documentary film, so that they learn that a degree in history does not confine them to a future fighting for limited tenure-track opportunities. Our department has also developed a very active chapter within our university-wide Future Professoriate Program (FPP). The students involved in FPP, together with faculty advisors, plan and run monthly workshops on topics ranging from strategies for fellowship applications, the how-to’s of research trips, networking, preparing cover letters and job interviews, and developing syllabi and lectures. They have discussed alternative career paths. They hold an annual graduate student conference. The program is dedicated not only to helping graduate students be more informed about the field, the discipline, and the realities of the “job market”; it also allows students hands-on opportunities for self-advocacy and community-building so that they are better equipped to tackle institutional roadblocks as a cohesive unit. It seems that our FPP does at the micro-level what the proposed graduate caucus plans to do on a more nation-wide platform. With such dedicated, progressive-minded, talented graduate students, I truly hope that the new generation of French historians, despite current challenges, will continue to make academia a more equitable, truly diverse, intellectually vibrant community.

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