

**The "Productivity" Question: Assessing Historians and Their Work
AHA Council, March 2012**

The following statement, crafted collaboratively by members of the AHA Council, was adopted by Council as the Association's statement on the subject. It seeks to contribute to an emerging national debate over means of assessing the work of college and university faculty. Unfortunately, in some cases, proposed means of assessment offer uniform standards of "productivity" across disciplines and across institutions of higher learning. The AHA cautions against implementing standards of evaluation that do not take into account the distinctive characteristics of different disciplines and the diverse missions of various kinds of institutions.

—Jacqueline Jones, vice president, Professional Division

The ongoing debate about faculty productivity in colleges and universities has thus far generated more heat than light, in part because the debate has largely excluded the organized voices of scholars. Historians share with scholars in other disciplines many of the same responsibilities and professional standards. At the same time, in certain respects the study of history constitutes a unique scholarly activity, and assessments should reflect that fact.

As members of the American Historical Association, we work in a variety of institutions, each with its own core mission and set of standards related to scholarship, teaching, service to the profession, and community outreach. Historians expect that their labor, and the products of their labor, will be evaluated. Yet these assessments should, and usually do, come from the profession itself. Through the use of grounded, transparent evaluation processes, many history departments conduct their own rigorous, regular assessments of faculty for purposes of review for tenure, promotion, and merit-salary increases. The metrics for these assessments vary greatly across institutions; with so many diverse kinds of colleges and universities, it is impossible to adopt uniform quantitative measurements to evaluate history faculty. In order to understand the intertwined work of teaching, research, and university and professional service, evaluators must not only consider all aspects of historians' responsibilities, but also recognize that in certain respects the work of historians differs from that of faculty in other disciplines.

As teachers, historians instruct undergraduates in seminars, tutorials, and large lecture courses, and often train graduate students and supervise MA theses and PhD dissertations. In many institutions, history professors often teach large numbers of students outside the major as part of a broader effort on behalf of civic education. As scholars, many historians must expend considerable time and effort learning foreign languages, travelling to archives, and keeping informed about recent scholarship in their specific field. On many campuses a disproportionate number of historians devote substantial time and energy to administrative work as well as to other kinds of service to the academic community and to communities beyond their institutions.

Historians engage with their peers when they review manuscripts for publication, participate in professional meetings, serve on review boards for grants and fellowships, and evaluate tenure and promotion cases at other colleges and universities. As a profession, we believe that our members serve

their students and the study of history best when they have full-time, secure employment, and when faculty regardless of rank or gender share teaching and research responsibilities equally. In these and other ways we share professional responsibilities and priorities with colleagues in other disciplines. Like other scholars, historians consider articles to be a major form of scholarly production; however, the single-authored book, based on archival research, has been our core intellectual contribution to knowledge. Some of us engage in large, multiyear collaborative research and writing projects, and with the continued development of the digital humanities, such projects will no doubt become more common within the profession. In addition, we continue to diversify the modes of production of our scholarship, and to disseminate that scholarship in various forms. The AHA welcomes these developments, and encourages history departments to establish rigorous peer-review procedures to evaluate new forms of scholarship.

Compared with the research and teaching needs of our colleagues in some other disciplines, historians' budgets are modest, requiring not much beyond the maintenance of a good library. At the same time, even historians inclined toward collaborative work rarely have access to the large multiyear grants that are the hallmark of research conducted in some disciplines. Hence we do not consider collaborative work or grant-funding per se as evidence of superior scholarship or productivity; we assess our scholarship according to the value of what we produce, not according to its cost.

Many members of our profession focus their energies primarily on teaching and public outreach, depending on the kind of institution where they are employed. Regardless of their focus, though, historians learn to locate and evaluate evidence; organize major, long-term research projects; and write clearly. We rely upon both quantitative and qualitative data, and our scholarship is highly contextualized; in other words, our work succeeds in illuminating the past to the extent that we can marshal evidence that reveals a particular time and place in all its rich complexity.

The AHA considers it imperative that all informed citizens have a basic understanding about the past. Accordingly, many professional historians devote a substantial amount of time not only to producing specialized monographs and journal articles, but also to educating the general public about history by writing op-ed pieces; appearing in historical documentaries; giving interviews to the press; contributing to local-history projects; training elementary and secondary teachers; and working with museums, historical societies, and other institutions to bring history to a larger audience. These efforts are integral to our understanding of our national histories and our place in the world. Indeed, the study of history is integral to a liberal-arts education for informed citizenship.

We advise against using short-term metrics of assessment. In many cases, excellent teaching and mentoring and excellent scholarship are revealed only over a time. Just as former students often look back many years later and identify teachers who "changed their lives," so it might take many years for the larger, scholarly impact of a monograph to be revealed. Since significant research and writing projects in history can stretch over many years, a "one size fits all" approach to annual production cannot afford an accurate gauge of work accomplished in history and comparable disciplines in the humanities.

In sum, the work of historians needs to be understood and evaluated in terms that are relevant to our actual responsibilities to our students, communities, and colleagues. We affirm our commitment to promote the highest standards of scholarship, excellence in teaching, and a robust engagement with audiences outside the academy. Means of assessing our success in all these areas should reflect the various missions of specific institutions, and the uniqueness of the historical enterprise.