Undermining “Student Success?”
How US History Surveys Landed on the Chancellor’s Shortlist for “Low Success” Courses and What 30 California State University Historians Did About It

A visible problem
“High enrollment-low success bottlenecks”

Grade/enrollment data for a Cal State history department’s course offerings in 2011
Chancellor’s Office initiatives 2013-2018

More than **50** historians across **23** campuses

For US survey, **35** historians

Today, **7** historians defining “success”
Our big question in 2013

How do we stay true to our discipline in technology-driven, budget-cutting environment?
Our questions in 2018

How can we define and measure the effectiveness of our teaching strategies?

How do we demonstrate the value of US survey courses to multiple constituencies?
What did our teaching strategies share?

- Historical thinking skills and habits
- Uncoverage
- Academic skills via low-stakes writing (scaffolding)
- Community and belonging
How did these teaching strategies affect student grades?

Sections for 19 different Cal State faculty members:

- 8 sections: DFW grades drop 50% or more
- 3 sections: DFW grades drop by 25-49%
- 3 sections: DFW grades drop (% not available)
- 4 sections: no shift in DFW grades
- 1 section: increase in DFW grades
Why this downward pressure?
Why create a big survey?

**Collect** enough data for statistical validity

**Compare** data across CSU campuses

**Learn** how and why students struggle

**Connect** teaching practices to student outcomes
How did we create a big survey?

**Partners**
- Stanford History Education Group
- The California State University
- Course Redesign with Technology
- CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY LONG BEACH
  Center for Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness

**Tools**
- qualtrics.
What did we want to learn?

Who are our students? (demographics and background)

What are their beliefs and attitudes about history and history classes?

What are their academic dispositions? What are their beliefs about academic skills and strategies?
Tentative conclusions

If students are affectively engaged . . . . . . their grades will improve.

- Mindset change about discipline
- Greater sense of relevance and belonging
- Practice in general academic and disciplinary skills
- More complex sense of historical “understanding”

Fewer failing grades and withdrawals.
Who are our students?

- Historically Underserved
  - Underrepresented racial & ethnic groups
  - First Generation
  - Second Language learners
  - Face difficult financial challenges
Race and Ethnicity

- 50% identify as Hispanic or Latino
- 20% identify as Asian (mostly Hmong)
- Much smaller African American population (just 4%)
Education and Language

• 44% are First Generation students
  • 71% including parents who have only completed some college-level coursework
  • Only 27% have parents with a bachelors or higher degree

• 52% are Second Language Learners
Economic and Financial Challenges

- 42% are concerned about financing their education
- 41% receive Pell Grants
- High % of First Generation and Latino
- Work: 18 hrs/week
- Family Obligations: 20 hrs/week

How concerned are you with financing your education?

- Concerned a Great Deal: 19%
- Not at all Concerned: 19%
- A little Concerned: 39%
- Quite a bit Concerned: 23%
Overview of Student Mindset

- Attitudes to academic ability
- Attitudes to the discipline
- Understandings of the discipline
- Historical consensus
- Historical teleology
The Study of History Engages Me

- Asymmetrical question structure
- Significant shift in the direction of engagement
- More than two-thirds found our courses engaging
- Shift does not have significant correlation with course grades
The Study of History Engages Me

- Considerable uniformity across groups of varying educational background
The Study of History Engages Me

- Considerable uniformity across racial/ethnic groups
History is mostly a matter of memorizing facts and dates

- Significant shift in the direction of complexity
- Even after our courses, about one-third still see memorization as central
- Shift does not have significant correlation with course grades
History is mostly a matter of memorizing facts and dates (agree)

- Surprising differences in attitudes before courses
- Initial attitudes not reflective of educational background in the manner expected
- Post-course attitudes even out across categories
History is mostly a matter of memorizing facts and dates (agree)

- Considerable uniformity across racial/ethnic groups
Linking US history surveys to “responsible and constructive” participation in public life

Long Beach (2014):

45% of students could not name a concept “helpful to you in understanding American history and citizenship” at end of course.
A majority have confidence to participate in political debates or community questions because of our classes.
Increasing students’ perception of relevance of our courses to their sense of self across family college experience.

"This history class was relevant to who I am"

- Prior Courses
  - Strongly Agree/Agree
  - First generation: 25%
  - Some college/college degree: 24%
  - Graduate degree or higher: 28%

- Our Courses
  - Strongly Agree/Agree
  - First generation: 49%
  - Some college/college degree: 42%
  - Graduate degree or higher: 53%
Increasing students’ perception of relevance of our courses to their sense of self across backgrounds, and reducing gaps.
Improving students’ sense of usefulness of our courses to their overall college success.
Qualitative data: Student expectations

Beside a passing grade, what did you hope to gain/did you gain from this course?

Pre-survey

Post-survey
Pre-survey: Vague goals of “understanding”

Beside a passing grade, what did you hope to gain from this course?

To succeed by gaining more understanding:

- “To have a better **understanding** of us history and not to forget the material, like I have in past classes. I want to retain the information.”
- “I hope to gain more **knowledge** of past historic events, and to **understand** more as to WHY and HOW they happened. I also would like to understand more of today's events as well.”
- “I hope to gain **knowledge** about past events and to be able to remember for any future purposes.”

Connect to present/politics

- “I hope to better **understand** history and be able to connect past events to the present in order to better the world we live in today.”
- “Better **understanding** of America's history and being able to stand up for my own opinion confidently in political debates.”
- “My hope is to gain a better **understanding** about US history and be able to apply that **knowledge** towards today's politics, history and world news.”
Post-survey: A more complex sense of historical “understanding”

Beside a passing grade, what did you gain from this course?

Practice in general academic and disciplinary skills
- I gained the understanding of why certain historical events took place and what led to them. I also gained knowledge on how to properly have a class discussion and work within a group.
- I learned how to evaluate primary source documents more effectively and understand history on a broader scale.
- I gained an understanding of how to analyze historical content beyond just memorizing dates and remember names.

Greater sense of relevance and belonging
- I gained knowledge on the social and economic causes for our nation's growth throughout it's history. I have also learned of the differences of political views and how it shaped our modern political system.
- I gained knowledge that happened in the United States. There was a lot that I thought I knew but didn't, so it was rewarding getting to learn more about the beginning of how this country started.
- I gained a better understanding of why America is the way that it is. Why it is in its current state of race and gender discussion.
Qualitative data: Student challenges

What do you think your biggest challenge will be/was in this class?

Pre-survey

Post-survey
Pre-survey: Reading the biggest challenge

What do you think your biggest challenge will be in this class?

Reading:

- “Keeping up with the work if it requires reading and staying up during the lecture”
- “I think my biggest challenge will be the reading assignments because I have a short attention span.”
- “Being able to understand the reading so it will not be boring to me.”
- “The biggest challenge for me would be the reading assignments because I get really sleepy when reading, even when I read in a place where I can't sleep.”

Dates/Memorizing/Remembering:

- “Memorizing people and dates”
- “Remembering dates and names.”
- “My biggest challenge would have to be dates, because I'm quite bad at remembering what event occurred what year.”
- “I am not good at memorizing, so year and people's name would be difficult when I study for test.”
Post-survey: Mindset change about discipline

What do you think your biggest challenges were in this class?

Understanding
● “Some of the readings were a bit challenging to understand, mostly due to the language the writers used at the time.”
● “I think the biggest challenge was understanding the primary source fully”
● “Reading the weekly readings. Some were hard to understand.”
● “Biggest challenges in this class was backing my understanding of history with evidence from historical documents.”

Time Management
● “I think was prioritizing my time and work.”
● “getting the work done on time.”
● “My biggest challenges in this class were actually showing up to lecture since I had a lot of work in other classes that I had to finish during History lecture time, I guess it was just my busy schedule that stopped me from doing my best in class.”
What do students say...

Mindshift change about discipline
Greater sense of relevance and belonging
Practice in general academic and disciplinary skills
More complex sense of historical “understanding”
Conclusion: A new professional identity

What skills and mindsets do students history professors need to thrive in today’s changing world?