

A GUIDE TO THE GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN HISTORY
AT NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
FOR
PART-TIME STUDENTS

(Prepared Summer 2002 by Stephen Foster, Director of Graduate Studies, 1997-2002)

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Uses and Limitations of These Guidelines

This pamphlet offers commentary on a number of formal rules set by the Graduate School and the Department of History that are of particular interest to part-time students, along with some advice on getting through the program as expeditiously as possible. Keep in mind that procedures change over time and exceptions may sometimes be necessary. Do not, therefore, regard what follows as a legal document or a binding statement of rights and duties. The Graduate Catalog contains the official statement of university and department regulations.

Introduction

This pamphlet is intended for part-time students in the Department of History's graduate programs. A part-time student is a student in a graduate history degree program who is enrolled for fewer than nine hours in a given semester. This pamphlet will identify some fairly common potential problems in the proposed courses of study of part-time students and then offer some advice on how to deal with them. All or at least the large majority of what follows can be found elsewhere, in the annual NIU *Graduate Catalog* and in the department's own Handbook for History Graduate Students.

People who take graduate-level History courses and simultaneously hold down full-time jobs, have young families, are care takers of some sort, or are engaged in some combination of the above, are typically short on time and have competing priorities. So, this pamphlet is a short cut for getting around the most obvious academic problems likely to affect part-timers. The less obvious snares still require the two other publications and the advice of someone who has the full-time responsibility of making sense of all this. In such cases, you should e-mail or call the History Graduate Office or, better still, make an appointment with the department's Director of Graduate Studies.

What follows concentrates on MA students because many of them are part-timers, while doctoral level History graduate students still taking classes are mostly full-timers. Students-at-Large (SALs) will get substantial treatment on the grounds that many part-time MAs begin their graduate work as SALs, and the transition to the degree program can sometimes be a little rocky. Assistantships and other forms of financial aid will be omitted because almost all of it is earmarked for full-timers, and the very special situations international students face will not come up at all since they, too, are full-timers by definition.

Getting into the Program

- Applicants to the Master's Program may apply for Fall or Spring admission.
- Applicants to the Ph.D. Program may apply for Fall admission only.
- See the Graduate History website www.niu.edu/historygrad for application deadlines.

To be considered for admission to the Graduate Program in History, a prospective student must submit a formal application, subject to review by the Graduate School and History Department, which renders a decision on admission. In considering admission, the Department takes a broad look at all available evidence of the applicant's ability to do graduate-level work in history. Grades in relevant subjects, scores on the General Test of the Graduate Record Exam, letters of recommendation, language skills, and the student's statement of objectives and writing sample are carefully reviewed. For applications to the Ph.D. program, the department also considers the prospective student's proposed fields of study and the probable area of dissertation. A crucial consideration will be whether the History Department has faculty expertise in the proposed field of study.

Students who have completed the Bachelor's Degree will be considered for admission to the Master's Program in History. Students who have completed a Master's Degree in history will be considered for admission to the Doctoral Program in History.

Application materials required include:

- An official transcript detailing undergraduate work taken at any institution from which you have earned an undergraduate degree. If you have taken graduate work elsewhere, you will need official transcripts for all of that too. But if you have already taken graduate work at NIU, that record will go into the file automatically.
- A report of your scores on the General Test of the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE).
- Two letters of recommendation for prospective MA students (three for prospective PhDs) evaluating your ability to do graduate work in History. These should be on the NIU forms provided with the application for admission.
- The department's additional requirements:
 - an application essay
 - a writing sample, preferably an undergraduate or graduate-level history research paper (or, alternatively, an analytical essay)

The **GREs** probably generate more concern than any other item in the application process. Rest assured that the History Department is well aware that the best predictor of future academic success is not standardized test scores but rather a record of previous academic success. But, as everybody also knows, what is an A in one institution can be a B somewhere else, so it is also

useful to have as well a single comparative measure for all applicants.

For purposes of the application, there is no such thing as a minimum required score. By far the largest share of our interest in the GREs falls on the verbal and analytical writing sections of the exam. We are also well aware that if you have not had much in the way of course work in recent years you may not perform as well on the GREs as someone with a freshly minted BA or MA. We even know that some very smart people are very bad test takers. The GREs are just one item out of four that we take into consideration. They are never decisive in themselves and usually do not play as large a part in our decisions as the other three pieces of evidence.

Letters of recommendation. If at all possible they should come from someone who has taught you at the college level and preferably from someone who has taught you history. Recommendations from supervisors, colleagues, clergymen, or others who have encountered you in a non-academic setting usually do not tell us as much of what we need to know in making our decisions.

The obvious problem: some people took their previous university-level work so long ago that there is no one left to ask for a recommendation. If this is your situation, you can:

- Let us know either in your application essay or in a separate communication that you cannot any longer get letters of recommendation from your previous college or university teachers. We will simply make our decision on the basis of such information as we do have.
- Provide letters from an official placement file at a previous institution. By definition, these letters are typically old and may, therefore, be of limited utility to the department.
- Take a number of history courses for graduate credit at NIU as a Student-at-Large. If you do well in these courses, you can ask their respective instructors for letters of recommendation, and if you are subsequently accepted into the History MA or PhD programs, these courses taken as an SAL can be applied towards the degree requirements.

One caution, however. Doing a fair amount of one's course work as an SAL before applying for the degree program has a lot of obvious attractions. It also has a lot of (not-so-obvious) drawbacks. These will be discussed in the section following this one.

Finally, the **application essay**. Significant numbers of applications go wrong here.

- The application essay is required. If the application essay is missing, the file cannot be acted on, and no decision will be made.
- Some individuals simply repeat on the department's application essay form the brief "Statement of Career Goals" they filled in on the University's application for admission. While there is some overlap between the two, the department's application essay asks for more information, and calls for a more sustained and developed statement.

- A number of people who do give us a full-length essay still don't say much. We need to know the types of history you are interested in, the nature of your preparations for graduate work in history, and your reasons for wanting to enter a degree program.

In difficult cases, application essays can be decisive. We take them seriously, and so should you. If you are uncertain what to include in your essay, ask us for help. We won't write the essay for you but we can at least tell you if you are on the right track and, if not, what you might cover to get back on.

A Special Situation: SALs

Many people who eventually enter the MA or PhD programs take their first graduate courses in history as Students-at-Large (SALs). Sometimes this status is the result of a deliberate decision: the individuals in question are hoping to use a satisfactory performance in these courses to establish their bona fides before applying for admission. Or returning students take courses as SALs to test their readiness for graduate study. Still other students, after taking graduate history courses for personal or vocational reasons, decide they want to go on taking them and get a graduate degree in history.

It is often useful to build up a track record by taking courses as an SAL prior to applying to a degree program. You may get a pertinent letter of recommendation out of the course, and a good performance is a strong argument in favor of your ability to do graduate work. But what if you do not do all that well? You will have spent both time and money without achieving your purposes, and no matter how much the department may protest that a substantial commitment to history as an SAL does not guarantee admission to a degree program, you will feel disappointed. So think carefully before you attempt to use SAL status as a route to admission to the degree program. If your record is otherwise pretty good you might as well apply directly to the degree program. The person who would most benefit from establishing a track record as an SAL is someone with a "thin [admissions] file." What is a thin file? Imagine someone who received his or her bachelor's degree ten or so years ago. The undergraduate GPA is less than wonderful because back then the applicant lacked the maturity the intervening decade has brought. The verbal GRE score may be nothing to boast of: taking a test of this sort is just not what he or she is used to any longer. The applicant has no writing samples, even of the best undergraduate work, and no one at the alma mater is left who can remember the student clearly. Someone in this situation might be well advised to take History courses as an SAL first before applying for admission. Even here, however, the strategy has its qualifications.

- The risks involved in this route to admission are indicated above. Be sure in your own mind that you are really willing to take them.
- If you are going to do it, do it properly. That is, take several courses, not just one, and if at all possible make one of them a 500-level reading seminar. MA students must take nine of their thirty hours as reading seminars, and these courses are more difficult and time consuming than the 400-level courses eligible for graduate credit. If you find your sample

seminar overwhelming, you are not likely to complete your degree, even if admitted to the program.

Most of the other difficulties that SALs in particular are liable to encounter require separate discussion later in this pamphlet. But we can at least list them summarily here.

- Credit for courses taken as an SAL can be used towards a degree program, but only up to a limit of fifteen hours. If you want to use more than fifteen hours, you will need to make a special case to the Director of Graduate Studies.
- SALs sometimes take only 400-level courses. No more than twelve hours of these courses can be applied towards the MA degree (up to 24 for the Ph.D.) and sometimes fewer.
- Many SALs take their course work on-campus most of the time, but a significant minority have taken most or all of it at one of the three off-campus centers. Individuals in the latter category can run into one or more of three special problems when they enter a degree program:
 - They will have exceeded the nine-hour limit on courses taken as HIST 498.
 - They may have difficulty finding qualified examiners for their Comprehensive Examinations because off-campus instructors may not be members of the graduate faculty.
 - Some of the courses taken may not be applicable for credit towards a graduate degree in History, either because they were taken at the 300 level or because they were taken in an area outside of history (e.g., education) that cannot be used to fulfill history graduate degree requirements.
 - Courses taken by students in degree programs are subject to time limits and date after a certain period of years. But if you began your graduate career as an SAL before entering a degree program, then the time limits begin with these courses. So, if, for example, you spent three years as an SAL and then entered the MA program, you have only three years to graduate before your earliest course work starts to date. (More of this in the next sections.)

Staying In

Suppose you apply for Spring semester admission, but we do not receive all of your materials by the decision application date? What happens then?

You will automatically be counted as applying for admission to the next semester. And if the file is still not complete in time for that next semester's admission decision, your application will be counted as applying for admission to the following term. In each case you will not have to reapply for admission or pay the application fee over again--you just have to work on completing your file.

If, however, you work your way through three terms without admission, you do have to reapply and pay a new application fee, unless you specifically advise the Graduate School that you **are** planning to complete your file, and indicate the desired term of admission toward which you are now aiming.

Once you are in the program, it can be a little too easy to fall out again at one or the other of two points in one's academic career:

- When you are first admitted. The letter of admission, which comes from the Graduate School, will announce in **bold face type** that you have been admitted to a degree program as of some particular term. If you do not enroll for classes in the semester or session so named, your application will be canceled. Here again it is no great stretch of the imagination to think of reasons why part-timers, having asked in good faith to be admitted in a particular semester, find that because of unexpected problems at work, family emergencies, or you name it, they are unable to take class work at that time after all. If that does happen, you need only write to the Graduate School asking for a deferral of your admission until a later semester. You can ask for deferrals of up to two years (and may ask for more than one, to a maximum combined total of two years from the original term of admission.)
- When there are long gaps in your progress towards the degree. Most students in a degree program take courses more terms than not until they have completed the requirements. However, it is by no means unimaginable that some circumstance or other will cause an extended hiatus in your course work. **If you go two full calendar years without any course work of any sort, then the Graduate School will automatically cancel your admission.** (Unfortunately, NIU lacks the funds to inform you of the cancellation, and you will find out about it only on the next occasion when you try to register for classes.) Alternatively, if you do take classes in any given term, but none in your major field, your major department (History in this case) can, if it wishes, petition to have your admission canceled anyway.

If you fall victim to either limitation, you will have to reapply for admission, but you will not have to retake the GREs or provide duplicate official transcripts.

Retaining Credit for Course Work

A course in History taken for graduate credit requires a significant degree of time, effort, and personal commitment. What could be more frustrating than to finish a course and then at a later date to lose the credit earned? It can and does happen. There are a variety of ways one can do oneself in, but part-timers are especially vulnerable to two of them.

- **Permanent Incompletes.** If for one of a variety of reasons you find yourself unable to do all the work required in a course, you may ask the instructor for a grade of Incomplete (**I**). Your instructor is under no obligation to comply, but let us suppose s/he does. As a graduate student you are required to make up the missing work and receive a letter grade by the end of the next semester or session. What is meant here is not the next semester or session when you are enrolled but the next one, period. (You can find the exact date simply by checking the calendar on the first page of the Schedule of Courses for the relevant semester or session. For example, suppose you received an **I** for a course taken in the Summer session. The Schedule for the fall semester directly following gives the last date for the **I** to be replaced by a letter grade.) Spring semester incompletes are especially difficult to make up because the deadline is the last class day of the following Summer session, roughly three months later.

If an **I** is not made up by the deadline in question it becomes an **IN** (a permanent incomplete). **Permanent Incompletes are all but impossible to change once received.** And no credit of any sort is given for the course, even if the student did not need to do all that much more to fulfill the course requirements.

There are two ways to avoid an **IN** and the consequent loss of credit.

- The instructor of the course can petition the Graduate School for a one-term extension of the deadline for making up your **I**. The only persuasive grounds for such a petition succeeding would be serious illness--the kind that puts you in the hospital--or some analogous unforeseen catastrophe.
- Request the instructor to give you a letter grade on the basis of such work in the course in question as you did complete. If the instructor agrees, you may not get the grade you would have earned if you had completed all the course requirements, but it may not be as unfortunate as no grade at all and no credit for the course.
- **Dated Course Work.** This one lends itself to misunderstanding. Basically, course work that is applied towards a degree requirement "dates" (that is, becomes too old to use in the degree program, though you retain indefinitely the credit earned on your cumulative academic record) after a fixed period of years if you do not graduate within the period

allowed. The limitation of time is six years for an MA degree and nine years for a PhD.

Consider the following:

- Dating of course work has absolutely nothing to do with cancellation of admission to a program. You are not thrown out after six or nine years. You just lose the ability to apply your oldest course work toward the degree requirement.
- When does the six or nine year period start? Not with your admission to the degree program but with the very first course that is being used to satisfy degree requirements, even if you were not yet admitted to the degree program when you took it. (What sort of courses would these be? Transfer credit for work done elsewhere or courses taken as an SAL that are applied to the degree requirements.)
- How to determine the six or nine year period? Identify an anticipated graduate date and go back six or nine years. For example, suppose you took a History course at the 400 level as an SAL in Fall 1999 but were not admitted to the program until Spring 2001. If that course is going to be used towards the MA degree requirements, then you have six years to graduate from the time it was taken. If you do not graduate by August 2005, you ordinarily would not be able to use the credit acquired in Fall 1999 towards your MA degree.

Now, suppose you do have a somewhat extended academic career and a course has dated or is about to date. Can you do anything about it? It depends.

Transfer credit dates irrevocably. You can use up to fifteen hours of appropriate graduate credit taken elsewhere towards your NIU degree, but if it dates it is useless.

Credit taken at NIU has more possibilities. For one thing you can simply take the same course over again, or another course that fulfills the same degree requirement. Unfortunately, if you took your courses more-or-less continuously with few gaps between them, you are liable to find yourself taking new courses to replace old ones. Meanwhile, other courses not quite as old date in their turn, and you will have to make them up too, ad infinitum.

The alternative: “revalidation.” The old, dated course can be brought back to life to fulfill degree requirements under certain conditions.

- The course must have been taken at NIU.
- The History department must give its consent.
- The instructor who taught, or teaches, the course must agree as well. If that individual does, then you must convince him or her by methods agreed upon between the two of you (e.g., new assigned reading, an analytical essay, an oral exam) that your knowledge of the subject of the course is both comprehensive and current. If the instructor will then sign a form or write a memo to this effect, that course is as good as new and can be used in your program of courses.
- An obvious problem: what if the instructor of the course is no longer at NIU? Then the instructor currently teaching the course will do for the same purpose of revalidation. If the course is no longer taught, then any member of the department who is also a member of the Graduate Faculty and is competent in the area in question can do the revalidation. In such cases, consult the Director of Graduate Studies first.

Beyond Course Work

Apart from the coursework requirements for the MA and PhD, which are spelled out both in the Graduate Catalog and in the respective checklists that the department provides its students, two other requirements are worth some attention. They are the **language proficiency requirement** and the **comprehensive exam for MAs** (or the candidacy exam for PhDs).

A few tips:

- Americanist MAs are not required to demonstrate a language proficiency unless they have definite plans to proceed on to the PhD immediately upon graduation.
- MA students in areas other than American history must demonstrate a language proficiency regardless of their post-graduation plans.
- PhD students must demonstrate proficiency in two languages, regardless of their field, before the doctoral degree is awarded.

There is nothing about the language proficiency requirement that is of special interest to part-timers. One misconception, however, should be dealt with at this point, just because it is so common among all sorts of students. You cannot fulfill the proficiency requirement simply by taking or having taken an ordinary two or three year sequence of undergraduate language courses. This is because the focus of the language requirement is reading proficiency, which

often receives short shrift in beginning or intermediate foreign language courses. Instead, you are limited to one of two choices:

- Successfully passing a language proficiency reading exam administered by the NIU Office of Testing Services and graded by the NIU department of Foreign Languages and Literatures.
- Successful completion of an intensive course in reading French, German, or Spanish offered every Summer by the NIU department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. (Occasionally, a similar course taken elsewhere--one that is intensive in format and emphasizes the development of reading proficiency--can be substituted for its NIU equivalent. But both the History Department and the Graduate School must evaluate the course and agree to the substitution.)

The **MA Comprehensive Examination** ("the comps") does present some special problems for part-timers. First of all, the timing of the exams need some advance preparation. The exams are usually taken in the student's last semester, but the final report on the exams is due roughly a good three weeks before the graduation date. As a result, the History Department requires that its graduating MA students take the exams no later than some six weeks before the end of classes. **Arrangements to take the comps must be made with the History Graduate Office at the beginning of the semester in which you propose to graduate.**

The comps consist of two two-hour exams. Both parts must be completed within three consecutive working days. (That is, if you take the first exam on, say, Friday, you must take the second by the following Tuesday.) The exam must be taken under departmental supervision in DeKalb. This may be difficult for people with work and family commitments, but currently there is no alternative.

Part-timers often and understandably put off the comps until their course work is completed. Be aware that the Graduate School requires that you be enrolled in course work in the semester in which you take your comps. If you were not going to take courses otherwise, be sure to enroll in HIST 636 (Independent Study) under the appropriate area rubric for one hour only in the semester in which the comps are scheduled. You can enroll in 636 for credit or audit. The choice hinges on your precise intentions that semester as you prepare for the comps and should be discussed with the Director of Graduate Studies prior to the enrollment itself.

Choice of examiners. The M.A. exams concern only the primary field, so the two examiners should be faculty in that field. It is highly recommended that they be faculty with whom you have done course work, preferably in graduate reading seminars.

As was noted earlier, some part-timers take a large share of their coursework off-campus. One often-unanticipated consequence of taking a number of such courses can be to limit seriously your choice of examiners. Many off-campus instructors are not members of the NIU graduate faculty and are, therefore, not able to serve on comps, candidacy exams, or dissertation committees. This situation has nothing to do with their credentials (all have PhDs, some have significant publications) or their competence to be in the classroom.

You want to avoid taking a course with one individual and then asking another to examine you on the field in question. So, in general, confine your choice of examiners to on-campus faculty and be sure that they are, indeed, graduate faculty members. A list of history graduate faculty can be found on our the History Graduate Program website (www.niu.edu/historygrad) and in the Graduate Catalog.

Completing the Degree

Graduating involves more than walking across a stage to receive a diploma cover and a handshake. The potential hitches center on one thing, the very early date (usually one month into the semester) by which the application for graduation must be filed. For example, if you want to graduate at the end of the Spring semester you need to have a completed application for graduation on file with the Graduate School by early 14 February. And "completed" means: filling out a form, paying your graduation fee to the Bursar and receiving proof thereof, and securing the signature of your adviser. Additionally, the History Department must submit by the very same deadline a completed program of courses indicating that all requirements either have been completed or will be by the end of the semester designated for graduation. It is not something that can be done in the early evening after work nor can it easily be accomplished by mail or on line. (Mail will work, but more time will have to be allowed.) Normally, you should plan to be in DeKalb during the ordinary workday at least once in the semester that you graduate in order to handle this paper work. **You must advise the department's Graduate Secretary of your intention to graduate at least two full weeks before the deadline.**

You do not need to be enrolled for course work in a given semester in order to graduate at the end of it, but most people will want to graduate in the same semester in which they have finally fulfilled their last degree requirements. In some cases, indeed, postponement of graduation will cost them money. On the other hand, since you must announce your intention to graduate three weeks or so into the semester, you may find yourself in many instances uncertain as to whether you will finish in that semester. A language exam or the comps might have to be put off for some reason or a necessary course might have to be dropped because of scheduling conflicts.

There is, fortunately, a degree of insurance built into the graduation process. If you file for graduation in a given semester and some requirement remains incomplete at its end, your application will automatically be applied to the next semester. In the example we have been using you would have the whole of the Summer Session to make up whatever was needed. Even

if you were then unable to graduate in August, you would simply have to reactivate your graduation application (a short note will do and you need not pay again) by the graduation deadline for the Fall semester in order to graduate the following December.

In general, therefore, it is best to file for graduation as soon as you think it possible that you will complete the degree requirements by the end of the semester. If you turn out to be wrong, there is no additional cost and no harm done, beyond the possible frustration of having completed all your degree requirements but not receiving your degree for another whole term.