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To what might be done to alter the situation are the subject of what follows.

Academic historians are caught—some would say entraped—in the intellectual sociology of their discipline. For generations, their professional preference has derived from their success in creating knowledge in the major subject areas long central to their discipline: originally politics, institutions, statecraft, and foreign relations, more recently the many subfields of social, intellectual, and cultural history. 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 if they are interested in academic culture 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 hearty 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 equilibrium 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. Hurttado’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 Historically Speaking • September 2013

THE ALMOST NONEXISTENT HISTORY OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

James M. Banner, Jr.
In thinking about department histories, why should we stop with history departments only? It would be a substantial addition to knowledge about ideas and the history of departments in all the disciplines. Would we not learn much about American letters, literary scholarship, and criticism from a history of the Yale English department in the 20th century? What about histories of, say, the sociology departments of Columbia, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago, the economics department of MIT, the history and philosophy departments of Harvard, the mathematics and physics departments of Princeton, and the archaeology department of the University of Pennsylvania? Others will have additional candidate departments, all of them surely worthy of written histories. We should have those histories. It is not difficult to imagine how these might be written. First, of course, would come the entirely conventional methods of historical scholarship—research into departmental records, into the collections of faculty members deposited in libraries, and into the archives of the universities that contain them. But such efforts would not suffice to capture the full realities of any department. So here I return to the initiative of the Princeton history graduate students who organized last spring's workshop, which they intended as an occasion to begin a conversation about the department's past, present, and future. True to their vocation as people who preserve as well as interpret the histories of any single history department. So here I return to the initiative of the Princeton history graduate students who organized last spring's workshop, which they intended as an occasion to begin a conversation about the department's past, present, and future. True to their vocation as people who preserve as well as interpret the histories of any single history department.

Oral history embodies more than mere interviewing as people who preserve as well as interpret the histories of any single history department. As such, it is often tantalizing information about particular departments. The sole attempt to capture part of the 20th-century history of some of the major history departments in the United States is William Palmer's From Gentlemen's Club to Professional Body: The Evolution of the History Department in the United States, 1940-1980. A set of discrete essays about seven major departments, Palmer's book outlines, in vivid and illuminating detail, the basic elements of each department's history and of the influences of its major figures over roughly a half-century since the onset of World War II. Yet while even these few works are welcome elements of a slim literature, they scarcely constitute authoritative, in-depth histories of any single history department.

In fact, in thinking about department histories, why should we stop with history departments only? It would be a substantial addition to knowledge about ideas and the history of departments in all the disciplines. Would we not learn much about American letters, literary scholarship, and criticism from a history of the Yale English department in the 20th century? What about histories of, say, the sociology departments of Columbia, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago, the economics department of MIT, the history and philosophy departments of Harvard, the mathematics and physics departments of Princeton, and the archaeology department of the University of Pennsylvania? Others will have additional candidate departments, all of them surely worthy of written histories. We should have those histories.

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