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Themes in American History (HIS 155) City as Classroom Project Report

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Classroom Project

Using the City and Region as an Instructional Resource



Lisa Jarvinen, Associate Professor, History

Course Description

Themes in American History, HIS 155

This introductory survey course covers United States history through the lives of representative Americans. A series of biographies of major figures who confronted the pivotal issues and challenges of their times structure the course. Themes include colonial life, the emergence of American national identity, the founding and preservation of the republic, the struggle against slavery and racism, the spread of capitalism and industrialization, the rise of foreign affairs, the influence of immigration, the growth of the federal welfare state, and the creation of an inclusive society.

Project Description

HIS 155 is a core course, with a cap of 33 students. The size of the class in addition to how the course is typically scheduled makes field trips unwieldy. Furthermore, because it is a requirement, most students give it low priority in terms of how much time they will commit to it. In view of this, I chose to make my project optional. For extra credit, students could choose to visit a location in the city related to a class topic. I chose Franklin Court (part of unit in which we read his [Autobiography](#)); the reenactment of the Battle of Germantown (unit on the Revolution); and the Custom House / Market Street Post Office (unit on the New Deal works projects). They had to document their visit with a photograph and brief description. All sites are free.

Outcomes

Out of two sections of the course, for a total of approximately 60 students, 7 completed one of the extra credit assignments. They were spread about evenly over the three options. At the end of the semester, I gave them an evaluation sheet on the extra credit options at the same time as their course evaluations and explained that the university is gathering information about the use of city as classroom in the curriculum.



Lesson(s) Learned

This extra credit assignment increased the exposure students had to the city by directly linking city resources to curricular material, both for students who went to the sites and for those who didn't, but learned about them in class. Still, given their low motivation to do extra work for this class, a more effective way to do this assignment might be to make a substantial site visit and response paper into an option for one of the major course assignments.

Student Feedback/ Comments:

The majority of students responded that the extra credit assignments seemed interesting and relevant but that they chose not to do them due to time constraints, forgetfulness, or simple lack of motivation. Some responded that although they didn't go to any of the sites, they still learned more about the history of Philadelphia through my introduction of the assignments during class time. A small minority of comments were negative, suggesting that the expectation was too high or that the locations weren't interesting. One mentioned safety concerns (although several cited lack of transportation as a reason for not doing the assignment). Of those students who did the extra credit option, their responses were positive to enthusiastic.