

History and Political Science Disciplines

Sources: Richard Wagner, John Liepa, Joanne Dudgeon

Compiled by Judith Vogel

David Palmer was the sole first history teacher at the College. Richard Wagner was hired in 1971 by Russ Slicker, Director of General Education. He retired in 2009 after 38 years at the college. Another early history teacher was John Liepa, and then later Hal Chase and Dennis Kellogg joined the faculty.

John Liepa was hired in 1972 and retired in 2010. He taught Political Science at the Boone, Ankeny and Urban campuses. He thinks that he was the only DMACC faculty member ever to teach and have offices on three campuses. Liepa was hired by Dean Byron Hamilton and a Boone Campus Instructor. Susan Franzen was taking a year off to go to Europe with her ISU Professor husband who was going on a one-year sabbatical to teach in the Netherlands. She returned and had a change of heart about teaching. The position was opened as a full-time, 9-month position. At the Boone campus, Liepa was the "Department of History and Political Science." There were no other full-time instructors in History/Political Science at Boone until the later 1970s and early 1980s.

By the 1980s, possibly half of the history courses at the Ankeny Campus were in the hands of part-time instructors. When more campuses were added to the college, interaction between faculty members occurred only in the general Arts and Science meetings at the start of every semester. Later, when assessment became important, meetings were held among the history faculty from all campuses. Liepa would have liked to have seen more communication between full-time and part-time faculty encouraged by the college to coordinate standards of instruction.

Standard courses taught have included American History Survey, Western Civilization Survey, and Iowa History. These were courses that one would expect in the initial two years of college. Special courses offered were American National Government, Great Figures in History, and Russian History (taught by part-time instructor Judy Hyde). The discipline added a History of Women, African-American History, State and Local Government, and Community Organizing courses on a trial basis. Some lasted only a semester, while others were taught for years. Decisions for offering courses were "Comfort Level" and qualifications of the instructor; interest and/or demand by students; availability of relevant textbooks and materials; and timeliness in a broader historical context. Cross discipline classes in Latin American history were also taught.

When Liepa first started in 1972, most of the available textbooks in history did an inadequate job of including and integrating social history, minority history, women's history, etc. He continues, "When I retired in 2010, the dilemma was — of the numerous excellent and inclusive textbooks, which one should I use? Also, with the internet and wonderful websites, there was so much more information available to supplement traditional sources, but the challenge was to find a balance, ensure students used reliable sources, and not let technology interfere with the primary role of a teacher. In the government courses, a much more "hands-on" approach would be emphasized, and it improved on just learning about "How a bill becomes a law," or "Tell me about the Iowa Supreme Court's role." Teachers

should lead by example, so I often talked about my 40 years of political activism and encouraged and rewarded students (extra credit) to do the same.”

History courses were first taught in old Building 7 on the Ankeny Campus. Later, the discipline was moved to Building 6, and then finally to Building 2. In Boone, all classes were taught in one building. The same was true for Urban campus.

More recent full-time faculty included Lisa Ossian. Current full-time history faculty (as of August 2019) includes Ankeny: Joe Danielson, Joanne Dudgeon, Paul Byrd; Boone: Charles Irwin; Urban: Matthew Walsh; and Carroll: Bethany Sweeney. Several adjunct instructors are valuable contributors to the discipline. Courses now taught are Western Civilization – Ancient to Early Modern, Western Civilization – Early Modern to Present, United States History to 1877, United States History since 1877, History of Iowa, African-American History, Russian History, and History of Civil War.

As with other disciplines, history teachers saw changes in the way courses were taught. According to Wagner, the courses initially were primarily textbook bound. In the 1980s, television versions were used for American History and other specialized classes like Pacific Century. These came to an end with the introduction of online classes in American History and Western Civilization. Technology used would include power point, films, video tapes, and slide transparencies. Teaching formats ranged from lecture format only to lecture/discussion and to use of small group discussions. Textbook material changed over the years. The inclusion of social history became important (health, longevity, marriage and family, migration, economic-social development of individual, and social engineering by government). All texts from late '80s on had those elements. Wagner stated that his own college experience in American history was based entirely on past politics. That would have been the case in the '70s. Liepa added, “In 1972, almost all Liberal Arts courses were text-book based, supplemented with guest speakers, films, and taught in a lecture/discussion format. From 'day one' my textbooks played an important role, but only a part of how I approached teaching. My classes always led off with questions and a dialogue to cover that day's key themes. I never lectured; I brought in lots of extraneous, but relevant, materials and tried to maximize class participation. I've always believed, and still do, that the most effective method of teaching is one-on-one dialogue, face to face, in a classroom with 15-25 students with a knowledgeable teacher who cares and students who are personally engaged. As we added IPTV courses, my role changed from teacher/educator to technology facilitator with minimal personal interaction between the students and teacher. As we began to go to almost all online courses, I retired because I don't believe that's teaching, but it is the way to increase enrollment numbers. Any technology used in higher education should be used only as a supplement to how a good educator approaches teaching — never a substitute. I sympathize with the single mom, who can't afford daycare or the cost of commuting, and to whom an online course is the only alternative, but I think she's missing out on a great, personal educational experience. “

According to Wagner, essay exams, identification quizzes, multiple-choice quizzes, book reviews, student written responses to article handouts, and examination of student notes from class have all been methods of assessing student learning in the classes. The grade averages among students in the 1970s and 1980s in overall achievement were C and B grades. That was superior to what was found

among students in 1990s and thereafter. Many classes in the 1990s and 2000s had no A grades for students at all. Liepa's view on assessment is as follows: "My exams included questions that required both objective and subjective answers. History and Political Science are disciplines that require learning objective facts about history and government, but also the ability to compare and contrast, understand cause and effect, relate how the past has influenced the present; and generally, the ability to think analytically and apply what's in the textbook and in class to their everyday lives."

When asked what changes he saw in students over the years, Liepa responded: "Many of our students, because of parental or peer pressure and because we were "junior colleges" or "community colleges," perceived that we were inferior to 4-year private colleges or public universities; they expected a "cake walk" of easier courses; less qualified instructors; and a chance to boost their GPA before they transferred to a "real" college or university. The changes have been twofold: Those who either weren't prepared for a demanding and rigorous challenge with a very qualified instructor dropped out early, or those who realized that their years at DMACC were as good/or better than what they would get at Simpson, ISU, etc. They did well, often exceeded expectations, and went on to get 2-year or 4-year degrees and find rewarding careers."

Liepa's feelings about AP courses: "Not knowing what the AP courses or instructors were like whom students had and what the content, or how rigorous their courses were, the transition to our courses left us guessing on how prepared those students were for a challenging course. If they simply took AP courses to save college tuition from a poor teacher and to boost their GPA, it wouldn't help them much when challenged by a demanding DMACC instructor."

The biggest single change or distraction from a traditional ideal classroom situation has been "social media" and "on-line" courses. Also, many homeschoolers who enrolled in Wagner's classes didn't last past the first quiz because they often weren't prepared to answer essay questions.

Wagner enjoyed teaching history. He agrees with what Bruce Kelly, who taught at Boone Campus, used to say: "I can't believe we get paid for doing what we like: teaching history." Wagner adds, "There is no other subject in the world to equal it. I have wanted to teach history since the 4th grade (and still do part time at DMACC and in Senior College)."

Wagner shared some stories from his teaching days.

Not a favorite: "One student told me in the 2000s, "Mr. Wagner, I did not come to college to read." Of course, I told him that there was no reason then for him to be in college, but I told him in a nice way.

Not a favorite: A student stole tests out of my office and shared them with a very good student. The latter called me up about 2 in the morning and apprised me of that. I went out to school and made up new exams. Then I confronted the stealing student in my office before class and told her how she was found out. I told her she had an F for this final exam. Then she said to me, "Can I do extra credit to make up for my "mistake"? I told her no, but I did not give her an F for the class. I can't recall what course grade she received, but I averaged the F with her other grades.

Favorites: I just enjoyed being in the classroom and dealing with students, even the less-than-stellar ones. I'll never forget the ones who were very bright who really took an interest in the course and worked hard to get high marks. Some of these students sometimes came to visit after they finished the course, which was really nice. Some even kept in touch for a few years in terms of what they were doing academically at a four-year place.

John Liepa shared the following: I loved teaching every year of my 38 at DMACC and have received enough positive feedback from former students to realize that they were really listening, observing, thinking, analyzing, etc.; and long after they graduated from my school of "academic tough love," they remember me as having had a positive impact on their lives.

Instead of any specific story or memory, some of my greatest satisfaction as an educator came from students who fit certain kinds of profiles. There were the non-traditional students - usually quite a bit older and usually female - who had 'put off' education to raise a family and support their husband's careers. They were often divorced and single parents who came back to school out of economic necessity, and with a lot of trepidation, but highly motivated and disciplined. Usually after one or two disappointing grades on a quiz or exam, they quickly moved to the top of the class.

Then there were the recently graduated high school students whose grades were just average or inconsistent, who weren't quite sure if they were "college material," and who often started out with a low grade. They were somewhat traumatized, but determined to do better. They knew they were better than that, sought out advice on how to study and prepare better, and would improve throughout the semester. I had many memorable students who went from "D"s or "C"s to earning a "B" at semester's end, only to show up next semester in another class to go from "C"s and "B"s to "A"s, and then would take more classes later on earning nothing but "A"s.

Two very specific memories involve two students, one female and one male, both older than me, and both excellent. One day in class, the female student, who was a retired teacher, commuted 4 days a week from Indianola to Ankeny. She rarely spoke up or raised her hand at the beginning of the course. She asked the class to turn to page 888 in the history text and look at the famous picture of General McArthur's return to the Philippines during WWII. Then she said: "See the soldier next to McArthur? See the soldier in the white tee-shirt above him in the LST? (landing craft). That's my ex-husband Bob from Minnesota, and that picture sat on the mantel in my living room for 30 years." I asked her if she would like to teach the rest of the class, and she did!

The male student was a retired school superintendent from Illinois who decided to move to Ankeny to be with the rest of his family; enrolled in my Iowa History class; and with relative ease, earned an "A." From that introduction, he went on to make himself an expert on "Iowa and the Underground Railroad," gave dozens of lectures throughout Iowa on the subject, wrote numerous articles and sections of books on the topic, and continues to do so to the present day.

As educators, we never know if in the short-run, we've had any long-term impact on our students. But, if we're lucky, as the years pass, they 'run into us' or 'reach out' and thank us for instilling in them the value of education and 'life-long' learning. When I retired in 2010, some of my former students reached

out, explained how I impacted their lives, and made my career as an educator seem so, so much more rewarding. I've included just a few edited quotes from former students:

"I was fortunate to have two classes with John ... I remember feeling intimidated by being in college class, but John had a welcoming teaching style, and I felt comfortable in his classes.... He used to sit on the desk in classes and talk with the students. He encouraged us to get involved.... He made his classes come alive and brought a passion to the classroom.... When I look back on the teachers and professors I've had in my lifetime, John will always be among my favorites.... It's hard to imagine the number of lives he has touched over his career!"

-- Jeff A., DMACC student, 1975

"In 1989 I returned to college. I was 29 years old, a single mom, and very nervous about starting over. I enrolled in John's American History class and during the first exam, I feared I had made a huge mistake. His exams were tough ... and even though I was shocked by how low my score was on my first exam, I persisted. John inspired me to compete, to analyze, to learn, and to love history. I believe the two semesters I spent in his class were the toughest in my college career. I went on to earn a BA and MA, but none of my classes were as challenging as his I toast you now, my teacher.

-- Linda St. C., DMACC student, 1989

"I wish that I could have taken four years of classes with you I think about you all the time, and you have deeply influenced my life. You are absolutely one of the professors who has been a mentor for me. I hope that I can be as dedicated and interesting as you are

-- Echoe L. -- DMACC students, 2006

