

What We Teach and How We Teach It:  
Indications and Opportunities from the SHAFR Survey of Teaching

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When confronting the SHAFR Survey of Teaching several months ago, some of our colleagues may have been reminded of Samuel Johnson's famous assessment of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "None ever wished it longer than it is." If so, the connection is understandable. The survey contained 106 questions, not counting those in the supplement, and some of them were open-ended. Nevertheless, some 150 hardy souls responded and completed many of the questions, furnishing data on more than three hundred courses dealing with the history of American foreign relations.

SHAFR's Teaching Committee conducted the survey from April to June of this year, with indispensable support from the SHAFR business office. As noted in the introductory letter from Teaching Committee chair Mark Gilderhus, the purpose of the survey was to ascertain *what* courses were being taught and *how* they were being taught. Members were encouraged to respond to the survey via the SHAFR website, while a paper version was published in *Passport*. Six respondents chose to use the paper version, and their responses were entered into the online database by the graduate assistant.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine the survey's response rate. Although SHAFR has about 1,500 members, a large number of these individuals do not teach, according to SHAFR executive director Peter Hahn, and hence would not have been in a position to respond. Moreover, since SHAFR does not maintain data on its members showing occupation, longevity of teaching experience, highest degree earned, etc., it is

far from certain how representative the respondents are of the whole SHAFR membership or even that portion of the membership that teaches undergraduates.

This article provides a summary of some of the survey results. We encourage you to view for yourself the responses available on the SHAFR website at [www.shafr.org](http://www.shafr.org). Along with a copy of the questionnaire, numbers and percentages are posted for the responses to the questions for which respondents were asked to select a single answer (e.g., "type of college/university where you teach"), and there are lists of answers to the more open-ended questions (e.g., descriptive titles of courses offered). A follow-up article analyzing correlations among some of the variables and responses may appear in a future issue of *Passport*.

## **Part I**

*The web survey was divided into three parts to enable respondents to answer one part at a single sitting and take up other parts later. Part I of the web version comprised questions 1-69. Part II continued the main body of the survey and had its own numbering sequence, 1-37. Part III, the survey supplement, was designed to gather for additional courses the same information sought in portions of Parts I and II.*

### **Section I. Faculty and Institution Information**

*Numbers on the left below are the question numbers used in the web version of the survey; answers are not provided here for every question.*

3. **Member of SHAFR?** Yes: 99%. No: 1%. (N=151)

4. **Year that you began teaching at the college level?** The answers in the aggregate were surprising: the median year (with half the respondents beginning teaching before, half after) was calculated to be 1993. Three-quarters of the respondents began their teaching career in 1981 or later, one-quarter in 1999 or later. The earliest year given was 1962, the most recent 2005 (four such respondents). (N=153)

5. **Highest degree?** Ph.D.: 90%. Master's: 9%. Baccalaureate ("B.A. Honours"): 1% (a single respondent). (N=154)

7. **Full-time/Part-time?** Full-time: 87.5%. Part-time: 12.5%. (N=152)

8. **Male/Female?** Male: 82%. Female: 18%. (N=150)

9. **Type of college/university where you teach?** (N=154)

- Doctoral/research: 46%
- Masters: 24%
- Baccalaureate: 20%
- Community College: 5%
- Other: 5%

10. **Length of school's term?** (N=151)

- Semester: 85%
- Quarter: 11%
- Other: 4%

## **Section II. Basic Course Information**

*In this section, respondents were asked to answer six questions about each of their undergraduate courses that deal to a significant degree with the history of U.S. foreign relations. The main body of the questionnaire was designed to collect information for three courses, and the supplement had space for three more. Hence the frequent appearance of three question numbers on the left in this section.*

*These numbers track the pertinent questions in the main part of the survey; where applicable, the few answers from the supplement (which drew seven respondents) have been folded in. In the sections below (questions #12 through #64 and in Part II, #2 through #23), the answers to a particular question have almost always been combined for all courses. With about 150 respondents and a total of 323 courses identified, the "typical" respondent thus provided information on two courses.*

*In a couple of instances, the process of rounding resulted in percentages that do not total exactly 100%.*

12., 18., & 24. **Descriptive course title?** Some 207 of the 323 responses fell into one of five categories, as follows:

- a. Twentieth-century U.S. Foreign Relations: 64 (with chronological coverage usually beginning with the 1890s, or 1900, or the 1910s)
- b. 1945 to present: 45
- c. Vietnam: 44
- d. U.S. Foreign Relations, beginnings to present: 27
- e. U.S. Foreign Relations, beginnings to 1914 or 1920 or 1900: 26

13., 19., 25. **Distance education?** No: 97%. Yes: 3%. (N=313)

14., 20., 26. **Typical class size?** (N=309)

- a. fewer than 18 students: 18%
- b. 18-30 students: 36%

- c. 31-50 students: 29%
- d. 51-80 students: 6%
- e. more than 80 students: 11%

15., 21., 27. **With teaching assistants?** No: 81%. Yes: 19%. (N=313)

(Hence 54% of these classes had 30 students or fewer. While 17% had more than 50 students, 19% had teaching assistants.)

16., 22., 28. **Typical enrollment by major?** Mix of History and other majors: 87%.  
History majors only: 7%. No History majors: 6%. (N=310)

17., 23., 29. **Typical enrollment by level of student?** (N=314)

- Chiefly juniors or seniors: 70%
- Chiefly sophomores or juniors: 13%
- Chiefly freshmen or sophomores: 7%
- Other: 10%

### **Section III. How Courses Are Taught**

#### **A. Required Materials**

31., 32., 33. **Principal textbook?** Responses numbered 305. Of these, 253 indicated use of a textbook. The two most commonly used texts were Paterson, Clifford, and Hagan, *American Foreign Relations: A History* (with 50 references) and Walter Lafeber, *The American Age* (with 28). The full list is available on the website.

34., 35. 36. **Other principal readings that are especially important or interesting?** Of the 273 responses, only 9 indicated that no additional reading was used. For details, see the website.

37., 38., 39. **Principal viewing/listening?** Of the 199 responses, 37 indicated that they did not use such materials. Again, see the website for details.

40. **In addition, any especially effective primary sources?** There were seventy responses, with most of them listing one or more documents; eighteen responses noted the use of various online collections. Most frequently cited was the time-honored *Foreign Relations of the United States*, including its online version, with 19 mentions.<sup>1</sup>

One particularly interesting example offered by a respondent: "NY Times front page article from Dec. 1943 that discussed plan of sending interned Japanese-Americans to the midwest to teach farmers to bathe and be clean is always a hit."

#### **B. How Courses are Taught: Types of Assignments**

41., 49., 57. **Research papers (i.e., students going beyond specified readings)?**

(N=255)

10 or more pages each, including primary sources: 49%

Fewer than 10 pages each, including primary sources: 26%

10 or more pages each, secondary sources only: 15%

Fewer than 10 pages each, secondary sources only: 11%

(Hence at least 255 of the 323 identified courses (79%) required research in materials beyond those specified by the professor; of these, three-quarters required research in primary sources.)

42., 50., 58. **Book reviews?** No: 53%. Yes: 47%. (N=298)

43., 51., 59. **Article reviews?** No: 76%. Yes: 24%. (N=291)

44., 52., 60. **Other writing assignments from *specified* readings?** (N=227)

Fewer than 5 pages each: 67%

5-10 pages each: 25%

More than 10 pages each: 9%

45., 53., 61. **Require use of electronic resources?** No: 65%. Yes: 35%. (N=308)

46., 54., 62. **Require examination of specialized websites?**

No: 77%. Yes: 23%. (N=304)

47., 55., 63. **In-class student presentations?** No: 54%. Yes: 46%. (N=308)

48., 56., 64. **Group projects?** No: 78%. Yes: 22%. (N=307)

65, 66. **Do you use 'how-to' books for any classes? If so, which one(s)?**

No: 71%. Yes, recommended: 20%. Yes, required: 9%. (N=148)

Forty-one responses provided specific examples. The most frequently referenced works were William Strunk, Jr. & E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (16 respondents); Richard Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing About History* (7); Jules Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History* (6); and Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers* (6).

67, 68. **Do you use course-management software for any classes? If yes, for what purposes?** No: 54%. Yes:

46%. (N=149)

The most common uses were to post syllabi (94% of respondents did so), to post assignments (91%), and to send students email (75%). Other possibilities were chosen or offered by fewer than half the users.

## **Part II.**

### **Section III C. How Courses are Taught: Use of In-Class Time**

*Respondents were asked to provide the percentage of time spent in class on six activities for each course they identified above. Naturally, such percentages varied according to the size and type of class taught.*

*Below are the percentages for each activity, across all course types and course sizes. The answers for each question were copied onto a spreadsheet and sorted in order to determine the median and quartile values (the values between the median and one end of the range). The last figure in the long row is the number of "zero" answers that respondents gave for the activity.*

*For example, for "professor's lecture" half the responses provided 50% or a lower figure, while half gave 50% or a higher figure; the percentages ranged from 0-95% (with no one claiming to lecture for 100% of the time); one-quarter of the responses were at 37.5% or below, three-quarters at 70% or below; and 17 of the 286 usable responses reported that zero time was spent on this activity.*

*These and other data may be analyzed more thoroughly in a future article. For instance, one would generally expect more lecturing in classes with larger enrollments, less in smaller classes. But our analysis in this article does not distinguish between what is done in or with classes of different types and sizes.*

*Questions 2-23 in Part II were devoted to this section of the questionnaire.*

**Professor's lecture:** M=50%. Range: 0-95%. Q1: 37.5%. Q3: 70%. # of "0": 17.  
(N=286)

**Class discussion:** M=25%. Range: 0-96%. Q1: 15%. Q3: 33%. # of "0": 1.  
(N=275)

**Small group activities:** M=5%. Range: 0-38%. Q1: 0%. Q3: 10%. # of "0": 77.  
(N=178)

**Student presentations:** M=5%. Range: 0-60%. Q1: 0%. Q3: 10%. # of "0": 76.  
(N=193)

**Viewing or listening to  
audiovisuals:** M=10%. Range: 0-33%. Q1: 5%. Q3: 15%. # of "0": 35.  
(N=212)

**Testing or other evaluation:** M=5%. Range: 0-25%. Q1: 3%. Q3: 3%. # of "0": 42.  
(N=235)

Two of the replies to the **Comments/Clarifications?** question in this section **were as follows:**

"I tend not to use videotapes, but provide visuals through PowerPoint that spark discussion. I have found that student presentations vary so significantly in quality that

they can waste time. When I do arrive in lecture at a topic I know a student is writing about, I ask them to lead the discussion (briefly), if I feel they are capable."

"Students have to do research for a character within one of seven groups (press, US military, US government, Peace protesters, South Vietnamese, NLF, North Vietnamese) and then they are responsible for an end of the semester press conference set in December 1969. Notes (with citations) and bibliography are due as well."

### **III. D. How Courses Are Taught: General**

*In this section, respondents were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions. The results may be viewed on the SHAFR website. The questions and a few of the answers are reproduced below.*

#### **24. What topics, themes, or interpretive frameworks most interest your students currently? (e.g., World War II, gender, NGOs, personalities of leaders, military, economics?)**

(N=130)

"US military intervention/foreign policy, globalization, human rights."

"Students are most interested in anything that can be related to the present. They also like the novels and technological-moral issues, and a certain segment are always into the wars, especially World War II, Vietnam, and the Civil War."

"Students enjoyed Cold War themes (reflecting my own interests) in the foreign policy class; overall, students really get into political history and even military history, though I cover less of that in my surveys; interestingly enough, though, they tend to do better on social history topics when exam time comes."

"My personal reactions, particularly how wrong my opinions have often been, to political, economic, and diplomatic events since about 1960."

#### **25. Are there new topics, themes, or interpretive frameworks that you expect to introduce into one or more of your courses in the next year or two?**

(N=92, with 72 responding in the affirmative)

"In an undergraduate class of 250 students it's difficult to be fancy. As we move on, I am more and more inclined to start the course from 1945 and come up to the present rather than stop at 1991."

"What I want to ensure is students think critically about foreign policy and have support from documents for their positions. I have added more on the Middle East."

"I tried tourism, which turned out to be a big flop."

**26. Are there new required readings or viewing materials that you expect to introduce into one or more of your courses in the next year or two? (N=85)**

"Nick Cullather's book on Guatemala, mentioned by Robert Shaffer in that good December Passport article."

"Not thrilled with Sherry, which at times is too much a polemic and a bit heavy on the holy race-class-gender trinity. But no other book covers the breadth of subjects that he does over as long a period. In the past, I have used "The Manchurian Candidate" in place of "Dr. Strangelove" for the Cold War class, and I hope to introduce "The Fog of War" this year, using materials developed by SHAFR."

"Was contemplating Kristin Hoganson's book on the Spanish-American War; I can only feasibly switch out one book a semester given my own work load, so that's one I may consider in the future; perhaps Walter Hixson's Parting the Curtain to integrate culture and diplomacy."

"I change my readings every semester/year to stay fresh. Also to defeat plagiarism-repeat papers."

**27. Are there new assignments? (N=72)**

"More research--lost skill."

"The kind of assignment Shaffer discussed in that article--especially having students compare Bemis with Williams."

"Smaller, more frequent writing assignments, sometimes written in the first person as a memo recommending a specific policy to the president at a key turning point."

"I often require students to create a "Major Problems" chapter on a topic not covered in the assigned reader--complete with introductions, documents, essays, and bibliography."

"None that I've planned. I feel 'bad' about not assigning a research paper, but our students actually can work with primary sources quite well given our own departmental emphasis; I assign book reviews in part because they are less equipped to deal with secondary sources and understanding their use in developing new arguments or areas of research, not to mention framing big historical issues."

"I have begun to insist on non-American (translated) primary sources to be included in final papers. They are available on the web. In some cases I am asking for foreign-language sources. I am working with colleagues in the modern languages department to

link assignments using foreign-language primary documents. This is an issue we need to take more seriously, even at the undergraduate level."

"No. The revised papers (after class discussion and my personal critique) tend to be of very high quality."

**28. Are there new in-class teaching methods? (N=68)**

"Not really. I enjoy, maybe too much, explaining the concepts and ironies in international affairs. What could be more fun than Reagan and Gorbachev?"

"Using more in-class, low-stakes writing assignments to assess how well students are absorbing material."

"Expanding small group assignments, including peer review of written work."

"Introducing 'syndicates' for fortnightly meetings. Students will work in the same group over the course of the semester and present their findings to the class."

"This dog is too old to learn new tricks. I get by just fine with a map and a piece of chalk."

"No--the ones I use appear to continue to work very well."

**29. If applicable to your situation, in a few words please describe how the advent of electronic resources (e.g., full-text journal articles, primary sources, other websites) has affected your teaching or how your students learn. (N=94)**

"JSTOR is their nearly unique source of articles and reviews here. They are very well versed in using the web--the challenge is to implant circumspection in choosing legitimate sources of information."

"They/we do not have access to JSTOR etc. I try to keep them off the computer and into their books."

"Nothing has had a greater impact on my undergraduate teaching, and on undergraduate research, than this. I am able to get 75-80 undergrads (with TA support) per class to do nothing but research assignments--no exams, etc. but all research--which would not be possible for me to do without electronic access to research materials. These projects start small, with assigned topics (for example a short paper on the use of the internet in public diplomacy by a nation other than the USA) and build to an individual 20 page research paper by the end of the quarter."

"Not at all--don't use them."

"Very important to me. My courses are moving towards full web integration, with online discussion groups, links for each week's readings, and extensive use of JSTOR and pdf-format articles."

"I really don't care for internet sources and I discourage my students from using them in papers."

"At a small liberal arts college with a small library, electronic resources have allowed the teaching of research techniques in upper level seminars that more closely approximate those at large universities. As a result, I am finding it easier to get students into graduate programs and, once there, they tend to thrive because they have already seen all the necessary research tools."

"Great! Except for Google, which is a temptation unto 'evil.'"

"It has not affected my teaching at all. It HAS affected how my students conduct research."

"I use material available on the web in all my classes. Online maps have been extremely helpful. I play Johnson audio tapes, available through the CSPAN web site. I give assignments that ask students to use various web resources, such as documents on the Korean War available on the Harry S. Truman Library web site, as the basis of analytical writing assignments."

*[The next two comments brought home to the survey's principal composer an unconscious assumption built into the question's wording that reflected the fact that he went through school and began his teaching career decades ago.]*

"As a new professor, I make extensive use of electronic resources, but this isn't 'new' to me, it's just how I was trained as a student from the mid-1990s-present."

"Full text journal articles, digitalized sources and web sites have been available since before I started teaching. I take them for granted, as do my students, and we avail ourselves of them."

**30. If you require your students to use these electronic resources, which ones do you consider most important? (N=66)**

Heavily represented in the answers are websites of one kind or another, JSTOR, other journal articles, and the *Foreign Relations* series.

**31. Are there other materials you would like to see available online, or more easily accessible online than at present? (e.g., all of the FRUS series, certain collections of photographs) (N=79)**

In the closest thing to unanimity found in the answers to this survey, 60 of the 79 respondents specified the *Foreign Relations* series.

There was also this reply: "Not certain, as I prefer that they learn to use the library and open books."

**34. In what ways is your teaching evaluated other than the traditional end-of-semester student evaluations? (e.g., mid-term student evaluations, "one-minute papers," peer visits to classes) (N=98, with 28 explicitly indicating none)**

Peer visits were mentioned by 44 of the respondents (not including those cases when they seemed to be used only as part of the promotion process).

**35. With enough time and resources, what would you like to do differently, if anything, in terms of topics/themes/frameworks, materials, assignments, in-class activities, evaluation, or other? (N=96)**

The most frequently identified areas were the following. Thirteen respondents would like to do more with discussion, twelve would do more group work, and ten more writing.

## **36. SHAFR AND TEACHING**

*The last section of the survey invited respondents to tell the Teaching Committee how SHAFR might assist them with their teaching. Once again, all responses are on the SHAFR website. The respondents to this question appeared strongly interested in having SHAFR help to support their teaching.*

**The SHAFR Task Force on Teaching is considering recommending to the SHAFR Council a number of initiatives to promote and support teaching, such as a regular column in *Passport*, workshops or programs at annual meetings, and the like. A "Syllabus Initiative" has begun, is growing, and is accepting contributions at <http://www.shafr.org/syllabusinitiative.htm> .**

**What topics would you most like to see addressed by these activities (e.g., use of particular documents or types of documents, especially worthwhile audiovisual products, bibliographic instruction combining the traditional with the modern electronic library, innovative assignments or in-class activities, etc.), and in what venues? (N=97)**

"Survey students five or ten years after graduation and ask them what they learned in college that's been especially worthwhile, and why; and what changes they'd suggest."

"A SHAFR web site that would offer not just links to other sites that have primary materials, but primary materials themselves, which would include anything in the public domain such as maps, charts, photos, documents, etc."

"All the listed topics would be GREAT. Also: assessing Web sites<sup>2</sup>; 'lessons learned' from long-time successful professors."

"It would be terrific to see more essays in *Passport* or DH, and SHAFR panels devoted to the art of teaching. I have always felt that those of us at liberal arts colleges are on the fringes of SHAFR."

"Novel ways to approach certain topics; examples of interesting/different assignments; lists of monographs undergraduates can grasp and will read. This could be presented at the SHAFR or even through special email--teaching bulletins."

"A more extensive web portal dedicated to teaching resources and links."

"I'd like to see sessions at SHAFR conferences about teaching. Other major professional associations have such sessions. Topics to be addressed could include new electronic resources and new kinds of assignments that electronic access makes available. I'd also like some attention to readings that have been particularly successful. I'm always looking for books and articles that stimulate student interest."

"Document use, use of technology, assignment sharing (including in-class activities), good AV items would all be good topics. The Passport column would be good, esp. focused on teaching, encouraging presentations at the annual meetings (perhaps even an open sharing session), or update "column" distributed via H-Diplo."

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In order to avoid summoning again the ghosts of Samuel Johnson and John Milton, this report is now concluded. Although complete responses are available on the SHAFR website, the Teaching Committee hopes that this article will provide SHAFR members with a useful overview of the survey. As noted above, additional analyses of the survey results may appear in future issues of *Passport*.

Readers with questions, comments, or suggestions are invited to contact either author (see addresses below) or the Teaching Committee via chair Mark Gilderhus of Texas Christian University ([M.Gilderhus@tcu.edu](mailto:M.Gilderhus@tcu.edu)).<sup>3</sup> The committee expresses its appreciation to all who took the time to respond to the survey. We believe that it will

have been time well spent if the survey and its results contribute to the growing conversation about teaching the history of American foreign relations.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of State website (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/c1716.htm>) identifies 53 *FRUS* volumes in electronic form, only four of them with coverage before the Kennedy administration (three for portions of the Eisenhower administration and one for the Truman years). The State Department apparently has no plans to go back and digitize the older volumes, so the University of Wisconsin Library is attempting to fill this gap by digitizing *FRUS* volumes covering the years before 1961. As of this writing, 157 of them are available on the website of the UW Library at <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/About.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Teachers who would like assistance in assessing websites will probably appreciate *Choice* magazine's ninth annual issue reviewing what it considers "some of the most important sites in major disciplines." A book-reviewing journal, perhaps best known to faculty in all disciplines for its "reviews on cards," *Choice* has been published since 1964 by the Association of College & Research Libraries. See *Choice*, Web IX, vol. 42, no. 12 (2005), 4-5, for details about this annual web-review issue. Many SHAFR members will likely be interested in some of the worthwhile sites reviewed in the History, Geography, Area Studies, Political Science, and International Relations sections of this same issue (see pp. 187-217).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Mark Gilderhus, members of the Committee are: Carol Jackson Adams, Ottawa University; Catherine Forslund, Rockford College; Mitchell Lerner, The Ohio State University–Newark; John McNay, University of Cincinnati; Richard Werking, U.S. Naval Academy; and Thomas Zeiler, University of Colorado.