

24 June 2009

Members of the Grant Committee
The History Education Network/
Histoire et Éducation en Réseau

Dear colleagues,

This letter comprises my report on MedSTEP 2009 (Medieval Studies Teaching Experience Program), an event that was held at Wilfrid Laurier University on Friday, 6 March 2009, for which I was awarded a grant of \$2500 from THEN/HiER. I applied for the funding, organized and served as the host to this event in my capacity as Co-ordinator of the WLU Medieval Studies Program.

WLU Participants: The teaching portion of the event involved eight 3rd- and 4th-year Medieval Studies students and four faculty supervisors, including myself. All of the student-presenters were students in good academic standing who had taken numerous courses in Medieval Studies and relevant courses in cognate disciplines. Most of the 4th-year students had applied to teachers' colleges, relevant Master's-level academic programs, or both. Because this event was also treated as a recruitment opportunity, there was also a presentation by a representative from the WLU Student Recruitment Office (SRO) and five Laurier student volunteers working for the SRO conducted campus tours.

High School Participants: The target number of grade 11 history students for this event was 100, comprised of about 30-35 students from three local high schools. We came close to this goal with a total of 84 students, but I had to issue an invitation to a fourth school in order to reach that number. Our guests for MedSTEP 2009 included the following four contingents of grade 11 students and their history teachers from the Waterloo Regional Public School Board:

- 19 students from Waterloo-Oxford Collegiate Institute
- 23 students from Eastwood Collegiate Institute
- 17 students from Sir John A. MacDonald Collegiate Institute
- 25 students from Grand River Collegiate Institute

The Program: The students and teachers arrived at Wilfrid Laurier University by bus between 9:30 and 9:45am and were led by student volunteers to the first meeting, at which I welcomed them and briefly explained the program for the day and acknowledged that this was all made possible by a grant from THEN/HiER. This was followed by a presentation by Ms. Lindsay Scott on behalf of the WLU Student Recruitment Office and then the students were led on campus tours which lasted about 50 minutes. After the tours were completed the groups reassembled in another lecture hall where I gave my presentation on the Medieval Studies program at Laurier and then distributed lunch vouchers to the students and their teachers, and also to several of our student-presenters.

Following lunch in the Dining Hall, the largest and smallest contingents (those from MacDonald and Grand River) attended a 50-minute team-taught presentation on “The History of the English Language to 1500”, which was supervised by Dr. Jim Weldon of the Department of English and Film Studies. Meanwhile, the two medium-sized groups (from Waterloo-Oxford and Eastwood) attended a presentation on “Medieval Religious Women”, for which I was the supervisor. I moved back and forth between the two classrooms several times to observe portions of both presentations.

For the second session we led our guests across campus to another building. I maintained the groupings of the first session (MacDonald and Grand River comprising one group and Waterloo-Oxford and Eastwood the other). The former group attended a presentation on “Medieval Warfare and the Crusades” (supervised by Dr. Jason Sager of the History Department) and the latter group attended a presentation on “Medieval Medicine and the Black Death” (supervised by Dr. Ron Ross of the Department of Archeology and Classics). Once again, I attended portions of both presentations.

Following the second session the grade 11 students and their teachers departed from campus and the student-presenters and faculty supervisors attended a meeting to share our thoughts about how the sessions went and discuss possible improvements for next year. This was followed by a modest celebration of the day’s successes in the campus pub. A few days later I contacted the teachers and asked them for their feedback and suggestions. Two of them replied.

The Results: The Laurier student-presenters, the faculty supervisors, and the two high school teachers who provided feedback expressed that they found this to be a rewarding and worthwhile program that should continue to be offered in the future, but with certain modifications to the format and content (as explained in detail below).

I registered this event for inclusion in the WLU Co-Curricular Record, which is an official document similar to a student’s official transcript except that it records extracurricular activities such as serving on the executive of a student club or volunteering for various on-campus events and programs such as MedSTEP.

About six to eight of the high school students spoke to our students after the presentations, showing genuine interest in the Medieval Studies Program and its primary cognate departments: History, English/Film Studies and Archeology/Classics. Several other high school students spoke to me or to the students and other faculty supervisors because, although they were not particularly interested in Medieval Studies, they did express an interest in attending Laurier for other academic programs.

The following list of five “lessons learned” reflects the input of the eight student-presenters, the four faculty advisors (including myself) and two of the four high school teachers.

- 1) The two faculty supervisors who attended both sessions (Weldon and Nighman) agreed that the presentations for the 1:30 session immediately after lunch were generally more successful than those for the 2:30 session; it appeared that this had less to do with the quality of the presentations than the receptiveness of the high school students, many of whom appeared to be bored or even asleep on their desks.

2) Two of the high school teachers mentioned that a number of students who wanted to attend were not able to do so because they have after-school jobs that start at 4pm. They suggested that the day should be re-scheduled to start a bit earlier and end at 2:30 instead of 3:30 in order to accommodate those students.

Response to points 1 and 2: It was decided that next year the welcome session at the beginning of the day will begin at 9:30, rather than 10:00, and it will also include my presentation on the Medieval Studies Program. This will be followed by the campus tours, then Session 1, then lunch, and finally Session 2, which would conclude at 2:30. (See Appendix 1 which comprises the actual schedule for this year and the proposed schedule for next year.) It is expected that this schedule will improve the receptiveness of the grade 11 students for the presentations in Session 2. As a result, the rooms for the morning session will have to be booked at the beginning of the Fall term; while it is no problem booking classrooms for Friday afternoons, they are in short supply for Friday mornings.

3) In terms of pedagogy, it was apparent to several participants that some of the student-presenters assumed too much prior knowledge by the high school students. As a result, portions of those presentations went into too much detail without providing adequate context in terms of definitions and explanations. For example, the high school students apparently had never heard of feudalism before. This is due to the fact that the World History courses do not reach the Middle Ages until late May or June, and any relevant information that students had acquired in elementary school was not retained. This was a lesson both for several of the student-presenters and for their faculty advisors, who had previewed and approved the content of the presentations in advance.

Response to point 3: It was decided that one week prior to the event we will schedule “dress rehearsals” open to all participants and faculty advisors which would allow for critiques not only from the faculty advisor for that particular presentation, but also from other faculty participants and also the other student-presenters. This should enhance the effectiveness of the presentations by ensuring that the content is better suited to that particular audience. It should also give the student-presenters a little more confidence in their speaking and teaching abilities by giving them practice in a classroom setting.

4) One of the teachers suggested that the date be moved back one week to the last Friday of February, rather than the first Friday of March, because some parents take their children out of school for vacation on the Friday before the week before Spring Break, rather than during Spring Break itself.

Response to point 4: While the last week of February would have worked this year, it would not work in the future because of the new “dress rehearsals” that will be instituted in response to point 3. Our students used Reading Week, which falls during the third week of February, to do the bulk of the work of preparing their presentations.

5) The teachers pointed out that their grade 11 World History course is what is known as an “open level” course which includes both university-bound students and those that expect to go on to vocational programs or directly into the workforce. I observed that even in the more successful presentations of Session 1 there were a significant number of students who were simply not interested at all in the academic content of the program.

Response to point 5: I spoke to Debbie Holland, the teacher from Grand River who brought the largest contingent, and asked her to estimate how many students she would have brought if we had invited only the university-bound students to come; she said that it would have been around 20 instead of 25, but she also estimated that about 5 university-bound students who wanted to come were not able to attend because of after-school jobs. So, if we end the day at 1:30 instead of 2:30 and issue the invitation only to university-bound students, we should get about the same turnout but a better calibre of students than this year.

One final “lesson learned” has to do with a purely administrative matter. Lynne Doyle, the Senior Administrative Assistant to the Medieval Studies Program, and I decided that it would be much easier for all concerned if the transportation arrangements were made by the organizer of MedSTEP, rather than leaving it to the individual schools. This is because of difficulties we encountered in reimbursing the schools which had already paid the bus company and the schools which simply forwarded the invoice to us.

Overall, I am very pleased with the results of this event. I anticipate that MedSTEP 2010 will be an even more successful event that will provide unique learning and teaching opportunities for everyone involved in it.

Dr. Chris L. Nighman
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Appendix

Schedule for MedSTEP 2009

- 9:30-9:50 Arrival of the Grade 11 history students and their teachers at WLU
- 10:00-10:20 Welcoming remarks by the Medieval Studies Coordinator and a representative from the Student Recruitment Office (Arts 1E1)
- 10:30-11:20 Campus tours by students working for the Student Recruitment Office
- 11:30-12:10 Presentation on the WLU Medieval Studies Program (Peters 1025/27)
- 12:20-1:20 Lunch in the Dining Hall
- 1:30-2:20 Session 1: "History of the English Language to 1500" (Arts 1C17)
"Medieval Religious Women" (Arts 2C15)
- 2:30-3:20 Session 2: "Medieval Warfare & the Crusades" (Bricker 112)
"The Plague & Medieval Medicine" (Bricker 113)
- 3:30 Departure of the grade 11 students and their teachers
- 3:30-4:30 Meeting of the Medieval Studies Co-ordinator, WLU faculty supervisors & WLU student-presenters (Woods 4-106)

Proposed Schedule for MedSTEP 2010

- 9:00-9:20 Arrival of the Grade 11 students and their teachers at WLU
- 9:30-10:20 Welcoming remarks and presentation on the Medieval Studies Program by the Medieval Studies Coordinator; presentation by a representative of the Student Recruitment Office
- 10:30-11:20 Campus tours by students working for the Student Recruitment Office
- 11:30-12:20 Session 1: Sections A & B
- 12:30-1:20 Lunch in the Dining Hall
- 1:30-2:20 Session 2: Sections C & D
- 2:30 Departure of the grade 11 students and their teachers
- 2:30-3:30 Meeting of the Medieval Studies Co-ordinator, WLU faculty supervisors & WLU student-presenters