

Statement of Teaching Philosophy, John Craig Hammond, Associate Professor of History, PSNK,  
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As a professor at a Commonwealth Campus, my primary job is to offer general education courses to students who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, who bring with them different experiences and preparations for college, and who intend to major in a multitude of different subjects. As such, my teaching is informed by my deep and abiding commitment to student learning, the humanities, and to general education as a core component of a Penn State education. Though I earned a bachelor's degree in physics, as an undergraduate I was transfixed by the humanities. I still am, and I bring my great love for the humanities and for student learning and success into all of my classes. Simply put, the best part of my job is watching first- and second-year students be transformed by learning; by seeing them accomplish more than they ever thought possible in history classes; and by imbuing in many of them an appreciation for the humanities and general education at Penn State.

As I make clear to my students on the first day of class, my courses are not designed for history majors. Instead, they are designed for first- and second-year students, many of whom have no clear sense of what they are interested in, what they wish to major in, or the meaning, value, and purpose of general education courses. Some professors take what looks like student hostility to their class as an insult. I take it as an opportunity. As I see it, I have to convince smart, savvy, and skeptical 18- to 20-year olds that a history class has something valuable to teach them. In short, I respect my students and their skepticism about the value of a history course and general education, and we use that to examine how and why a gen ed history class might benefit them as students, as workers, and as human beings trying to navigate their way through a confused and confusing 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My classes introduce students to the basic tenets of a liberal arts education by encouraging them to use history as a means for understanding, analyzing, and explaining historical changes and continuities, rather than the mere memorization of facts. The lectures, discussions, readings, exams, and assignments are designed to help students improve their critical reading, writing, and thinking skills. They also help students develop their abilities to analyze and explain historical changes in cogent, well-organized, thesis-driven essays. Finally, these classes introduce students to the uses of evidence, analysis, and explanation to substantiate thesis claims. Regardless of the specific topic in any of my classes, students learn how to think critically, how to construct arguments using evidence and analysis, and then to consider the significance of their claims. Through all of this, we remain focused on the humanities part of history as we try to understand how people in the past understood their worlds, tried to make sense of them, and then acted on it. At their best, history courses teach us empathy and humility.

To do this, my classes stress the critical reading, writing, and analytical skills that are the foundation of a liberal arts education. Recognizing that few of my students will major in the humanities, I stress the importance of the skills and dispositions associated with the humanities in their other classes at Penn State, in their lives, and in their careers. Rather than bemoaning what students do not or cannot yet do, I lay out for them from the first day of class what I expect they will be able to do by the end of the semester. I remind them that "they are Penn State," and encourage them to take ownership of their own education. As we move through the semester, I remind them of what they have accomplished and what lies ahead of us. These courses are challenging and demanding, but I offer students ample energy, enthusiasm, encouragement, and support. They respond accordingly. It is wonderful to watch students who struggled from day one, submit A-level work by the end of the semester. By semester's end, the far great majority of students produce creative and compelling work on their final exams and essays.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve Penn State students. Through seventeen years, I remain committed to providing all of my students with first-rate courses and a world-class Penn State education; for seventeen years now, those students always deliver.