

October 27, 2017

Prof. Will Kimler, chair  
Curriculum committee  
North Carolina State University

Dear Professor Kimler:

On October 17, 2017 I observed Steven Lechner teaching HI254, modern US history. Following is my report. To write this letter I began by comparing the syllabus, website, and my notes from the October 17 observation.

Prior to attending Prof. Lechner's course, he provided me with his syllabus and unrestricted access to his course website, containing readings, exams, student work, and a complete list of assignments for the course. His website is well organized, with clear instructions. His syllabus is comprehensive, with required university language, statements of learning objectives, and clear expectations for student behavior and work. Thus I am well prepared to assess his teaching in this course.

I attended Prof. Lechner's 8:30am HI254-05 section, which meets in 461 Riddick Hall. The room is well lit, and spacious. Before I arrived at 8:25, most students were already present. They or the teacher had pushed the long tables into a rough square, facilitating discussion. Prof. Lechner was playing "top hits of the 1940s" on the room's audio-visual system, setting the context for the material to follow. Prof. Lechner had also written a series of reminders on the whiteboard relating to upcoming assignments. Precisely at 8:30 he began discussing upcoming deadlines, deftly mentioning individual student interests, and displaying a sense of humor that would typify the session.

My first impressions were of a lively, energetic class. This is especially impressive because this class meets at 8:30am. Clearly Prof. Lechner puts his students at ease, and they respond with engagement and enthusiasm. The day I attended, 19 students were present, of whom 11 male were male and 8 female. I noticed five people of color with the remainder appearing to be white.

In his opening comments, Lechner set the stage for a discussion of World War II using a little thing-big thing approach: He told the story of the 1942 Rose Bowl, scheduled to be played in Los Angeles, then canceled due to fears of sabotage or an airstrike, and finally moved to Duke University's stadium in Durham. The Oregon State University football team traveled for days, and a Japanese American player was unable to stay with the team in motels due to racial exclusions. He ended this small vignette with larger questions: Why was this game played despite the wartime crisis? And in what other ways did the war impact American sports?

This led to a short but spirited discussion of women baseball leagues—professional leagues struggling—professional athletes who served and were injured or killed—exclusion of Japanese American athletes—and a segue into a second short lecture on Executive Order 9066, which condemned thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent to indefinite imprisonment without trial. Lechner illustrated his two short lectures with slides and text on the room’s projection screen. These slides displayed key factual data—events, dates, numbers—and featured Lechner’s own personal connection to Heart Mountain War Relocation Center in Wyoming. This allowed Lechner to briefly describe his own public history interests in memorials and their history, casually but effectively illustrating connections between a seemingly distant past and contemporary issues.

This led to a short discussion again followed by a short lecture on “America’s Mea Culpa,” Congress and the president’s long delay in apologizing for mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans. At this point the pattern became clear: Lechner uses brief lectures on specific topics to introduce much larger themes, and to generate student interest and discussion. He is very good at this, so much so that a great deal of preparation and careful planning can feel spontaneous.

At 8:45am sharp, Lechner handed off the class to a student discussion leader. Emma had previously met with Lechner, and began a fairly detailed, text-driven discussion of topics relating to the road to war and World War II itself. She drove the discussion for the following 45 minutes, with occasional followup questions by Lechner. Students automatically pulled out their document reader, and cited documents specifically when answering. I tracked student participation, and by 9:35am, all but six students—evenly balanced between male and female—had voluntarily contributed to discussion. Lechner called on most of the class, making sure that everyone had the opportunity to contribute.

The conversation (for that is how it felt) between students deepened as time went on. The specific events of the 1940s raised timeless questions about the tension in a democracy between executive power (often backed by majority opinion), legislative authority, and individual rights. As one student noted, twentieth century presidents were not dictators. They could not declare war, or send troops to war without consent of Congress. This led to a very interesting discussion question: “How does World War II compare to recent events in US history?” Students debated whether the constant readiness of US military forces since 2001 is comparable to threats during World War II or the Cold War. Lechner noted the consistent role of fear in US policy, avoiding any political stance but not the seriousness of the issue.

Lechner uses a textbook, the excellent Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!* While I do not use a textbook in my version of HI254, preferring to assign only primary sources, Lechner’s class showed the great value of providing a text in addition to primary sources. Students not only referred to material outside of the assigned reading, but asked questions that indicated engagement with broader historical issues raised in the textbook.

A high point of the class for me occurred when Lechner asked the students how this class is different from their high school history courses. He noted that the Foner text is argument-driven, and therefore leaves out a great deal. Students responded with a very interesting and quite sophisticated discussion of argument in historical texts, and the pros and cons of attempting a comprehensive approach versus the focused approach taken by Foner.

Lechner retook control of the class in the final minutes, praising the discussion and previewing the next class to come. He concluded with an outstanding short interrogation of Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union speech, the so-called "four freedoms" speech. Lechner asked, "what is freedom from fear?" Students responded with both a thoughtful understanding of the historical context and a discussion of US policy today. It was an excellent ending to a terrific class. I am not ashamed to say that my seven pages of notes directly influenced my own lecture in my own version of HI254 later that very day.

Steven Lechner is a terrific teacher. We are lucky to have him.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matthew Booker".

Matthew Morse Booker  
Associate Professor, Department of History  
North Carolina State University  
[mmbooker@ncsu.edu](mailto:mmbooker@ncsu.edu)  
919.513-1431