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# **French History in the College Curriculum: Survey Results**

***Michael S. Smith***

In 1989, as it had done eight years before, the Society for French Historical Studies mailed a questionnaire on French history courses to all its members. By December 1989, 126 professors at 105 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada had responded with information on 165 courses. These responses constitute a sample which, in its global characteristics, is quite similar to the sample gathered in 1981 (see table 1).<sup>1</sup> Neither sample, of course, is random. Quite the opposite, both are highly self-selected. Still, they are the only samples available. It is reasonable to treat them as meaningful cross-sections of the French history courses taught in the United States and Canada and to consider what they tell us about the place of French history in the college curriculum in the past decade.

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The author wishes to thank all who responded to the questionnaires, in 1981 as well as 1989. He also thanks Professors John Rothney and John C. Rule of The Ohio State University, co-presidents of the Society for French Historical Studies, who took responsibility for mailing the 1989 questionnaires, and Professors William B. Cohen and James C. Riley of Indiana University, president and vice-president of the Society in 1981, whose assistance made the earlier survey possible. The graphs were designed by Laura Baker of the University of South Carolina Instructional Services Center.

<sup>1</sup> Although comparable in format, the two samples are far from being congruent in content. Only forty-three colleges are represented in both samples, and there are significant differences between the two in the regional distribution of responses and the kinds of courses reported. Whereas the Northeast is the best-represented region in both surveys, the Southeast and West weigh more heavily and the Midwest less heavily in 1989 than in 1981. Courses on the French Revolution and Napoleon weigh much more heavily in the 1989 sample than in the 1981 sample. However, this does not necessarily mean that there was a shift toward the French Revolution course during the eighties. More likely it is an artifact of the survey itself because the 1981 questionnaire tended to discourage responses on all but survey courses in French history.

TABLE 1  
THE 1981 AND 1989 SAMPLES COMPARED

		By Region <sup>1</sup>										
		Total	Northeast		Southeast		Midwest		West		Canada	
			n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Colleges and universities represented	1981	117	40 (34)	18 (15)	33 (28)	16 (14)	10 (9)					
	1989	105	33 (31)	19 (18)	27 (26)	21 (20)	5 (5)					
Courses in French history reported	1981	155	58 (37)	21 (14)	43 (28)	20 (13)	13 (8)					
	1989	165	53 (32)	34 (21)	33 (20)	34 (21)	11 (7)					

Time-Frame of courses <sup>2</sup>	Antiquity or 1500 to Present		1500-1789		1789-1815		1789/1815 to Present		Other	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	1981	17	(11)	23	(15)	20	(13)	88	(57)	7
1989	18	(11)	14	(8)	42	(26)	67	(41)	23	(14)

Frequency	Every Term		Every Year		Every Other Year		Irregularly	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1981	—		48	(35)	68	(49)	22	(16)
1989	5	(3)	44	(27)	76	(47)	36	(22)

Clientele	Graduate Students		Grads + Advanced Undergraduates		Advanced Undergrads		All Undergrads	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1981	2	(1)	58	(43)	29	(21)	47	(35)
1989	10	(6)	55	(34)	43	(27)	54	(33)

<sup>1</sup>Northeast: ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, DC.

Southeast: VA, WV, NC, SC, GA, FL, KY, TN, AL, MS, AR, LA.

Midwest: OH, IN, MI, WI, IL, MN, IA, MO.

West: ND, SD, NE, KS, OK, TX, MT, WY, CO, NM, ID, UT, AZ, NV, WA, OR, CA, HI.

<sup>2</sup>Total responses vary because of incomplete questionnaires.

### The 1981 and 1989 Data Compared

On the whole, the news is good. As figures 1 and 2 show, enrollments seem to be up. Although courses drawing 50 students or more were no more numerous in 1989 than in 1981, there was a big jump in the percentage of courses enrolling 26 to 50 students per semester and a corresponding reduction in courses enrolling 25 or less. More evidence of improvement is found in the comparison of French history enrollments to enrollments in “similar history courses” at each college. Although the percentage of French history courses reported in the “above average” category remained the same, there was a substantial shift from the “below average” to “average” category between 1981 and 1989. Even more encouraging is the evidence on enrollment *trends*. In 1981

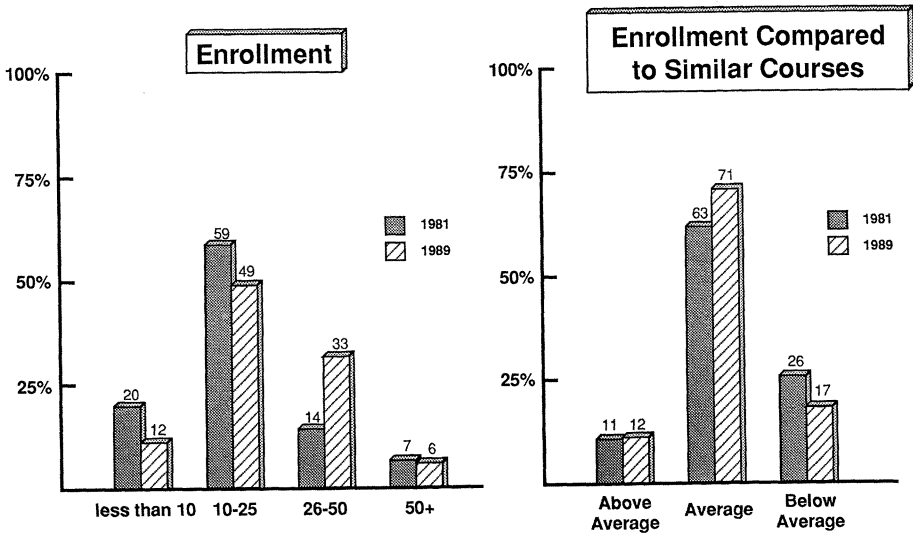


FIG. 1. ENROLLMENT IN FRENCH HISTORY COURSES, 1981 AND 1989

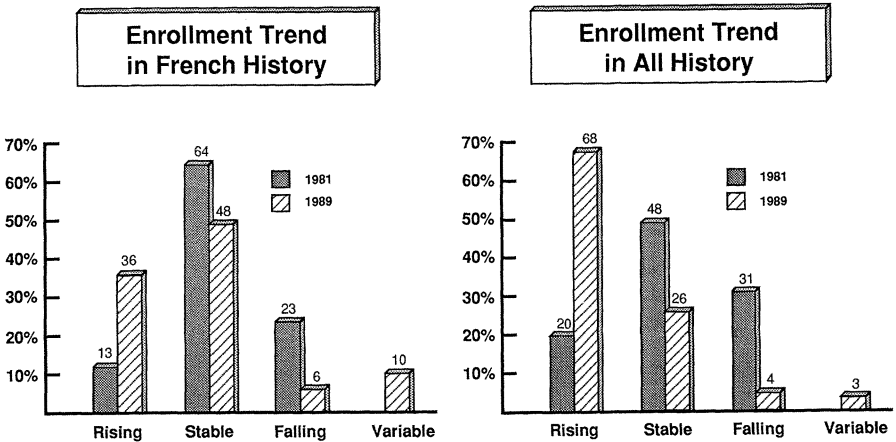


FIG. 2. ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN FRENCH HISTORY AND ALL HISTORY COURSES, 1981 AND 1989

rising enrollments were reported in only 13 percent of French history courses while 23 percent reported falling enrollments. By contrast, 36 percent reported rising enrollments in 1989 and only 6 percent reported falling enrollments. This is, of course, tied to the improvement in enrollments for all history courses, as the graphs in figure 2 show. Indeed, as striking as the improvement in French history enrollments appears,

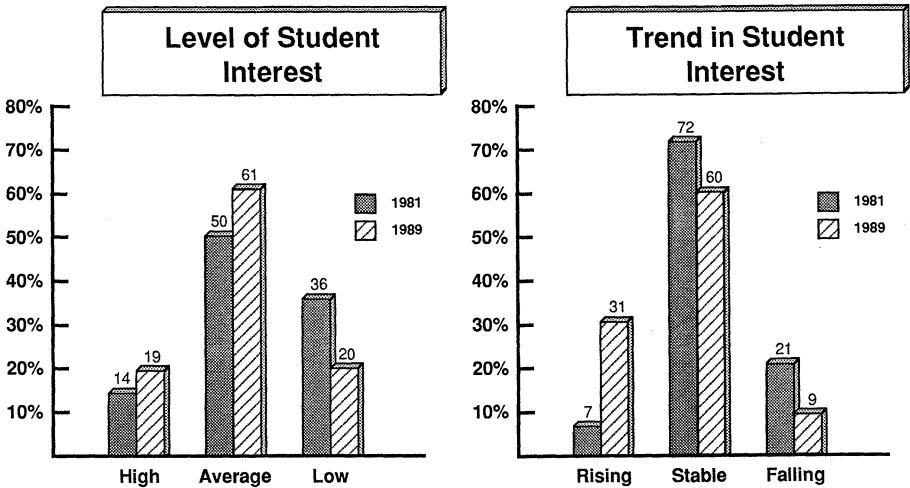


FIG. 3. LEVEL AND TREND IN STUDENT INTEREST IN FRENCH HISTORY, 1981 AND 1989

it is not so great as the improvement for history courses in general. From 1981 to 1989, there was a 380 percent increase in the percentage of questionnaires reporting rising enrollments for all history courses versus a 277 percent increase in the percentage of questionnaires reporting rising enrollments in French history.

Figure 3, depicting responses on the level of student interest in French history, offers more good news. The percentage of questionnaires reporting high interest rose from 14 to 19 percent and, even more important, the percentage reporting low interest dropped from 36 to 20 percent from 1981 to 1989. Best of all, there was apparently a turnaround in the *trend* in student interest. The percentage reporting rising interest jumped from 7 to 31 percent between 1981 and 1989, while the percentage reporting falling interest dropped from 21 to 9 percent. Further analysis of the 1989 survey provides some clues as to the source of this apparent improvement as well as a more nuanced view of the state of the French history course at the end of the 1980s.

### The 1989 Survey Analyzed

When the 1989 responses are sorted by region (see table 2), it becomes apparent that French history has not been enjoying equal success in all parts of the country. Although the average enrollments in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Canada were at or below the global average of 25, the West was well above it at 34. The West also reported a much greater incidence of above average enrollments in French history

TABLE 2  
 VARIATIONS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF FRENCH HISTORY COURSES, 1989

<i>n</i>	Average Enrollment	Comparative Enrollment		Enrollment Trend			Interest Level			Interest Trend				
		above average	below average	rising	stable	falling	high	average	low	rising	stable	falling		
<i>1. By Region</i>														
53	24	8%	73%	22%	51%	13%	13%	21%	60%	19%	31%	56%	13%	
Northeast														
34	22	3	84	13	33	48	4	15	31	44	25	35	61	3
Southeast														
33	25	14	71	14	37	47	3	13	6	79	15	10	77	13
Midwest														
34	34	30	53	17	50	47	3	0	18	55	27	42	51	6
West														
11	20	0	73	27	46	0	0	0	18	72	9	45	55	0
Canada														
165	25	12	71	17	36	48	6	10	19	61	20	31	60	9
All														
<i>2. By College</i>														
15	19	8%	85%	46%	46%	0%	9%	13%	87%	0%	33%	67%	0%	
Catholic														
49	21	7	73	21	58	11	11	17	65	19	17	72	11	
Private														
101	28	15	68	17	43	44	5	9	21	55	24	38	58	9
Public														
<i>3. By Time-Frame of Course</i>														
7	37	17%	83%	0%	57%	0%	14%	14%	57%	29%	14%	71%	14%	
Antiquity- Present														
1500- Present														
11	22	9	67	27	50	13	25	0	82	18	10	80	10	
1500-1789														
14	21	8	61	31	58	8	0	21	64	14	21	50	29	
1789-1815														
42	27	17	75	8	34	8	13	21	62	17	33	62	5	
1789/1815- Present														
67	27	12	66	22	55	5	7	17	63	20	29	65	6	
Other														
23	18	5	85	10	37	47	5	10	32	41	27	50	41	9

compared to other history courses, a greater incidence of rising enrollments, and a greater incidence of rising interest:

Above Average Enrollments:	West—30 percent	All—12 percent
Rising Enrollments:	West—50 percent	All—36 percent
Rising Interest Level:	West—42 percent	All—31 percent

Curiously, the West also reported the highest incidence of low interest in French history of any region (27 percent).

There were also interesting variations according to the type of college. Private and Catholic colleges exhibited a higher level of interest in French history than state schools, but average enrollments were higher in the state schools (28 versus 19 in Catholic schools and 21 in other private schools). Moreover, the state schools did as well or better than the private schools in Comparative Enrollment, Enrollment Trend, and Interest Trend.

When the responses to the 1989 questionnaire are grouped and analyzed by the focus or time-frame of the course, still more significant differences appear. In enrollment, the seven comprehensive surveys (Antiquity to the present) did best, with an average enrollment of 37. Eleven 1500–present surveys did less well. The two most common courses—surveys from 1789 or 1815 to the present and French Revolution/Napoleon courses—had similar average enrollments (27). Early modern courses were fewer in number (14) and lower in enrollment (21). In a comparison between French history enrollment and enrollment in similar history courses, the comprehensive survey was strongest, followed closely by the French Revolution. In Enrollment Trend, the French Revolution courses did best with 45 percent reporting rising enrollments. In Interest Trend, the modern survey did best (33 percent reported rising interest), while the early modern and French Revolution courses reported the highest *level* of interest (21 percent of both reported high interest in French history compared to other fields of history).

Putting all this together, one could say that, if you wished to teach a course in French history with high enrollments or enrollments above those of similar history courses at your college or university, you would do well, statistically speaking, to teach a comprehensive survey, the French Revolution/Napoleon course, or the modern survey of France at a state university in the western half of the United States. This judgment is confirmed by an examination of the 25 courses, out of the 165 in the sample, that reported either above average enrollments or enrollments of 50 or more.

In this “Top Gun” group, 13 of 25 (52 percent) were in the West; 20 (80 percent) were at state universities; 12 were modern French surveys, 7 were French Revolution, and 4 were surveys from Antiquity to the present. Another interesting fact: as a group, they had a relatively low concentration of history majors in their clientele (45 percent versus 54 percent for all in the sample) and a relatively high concentration of “Others” (38 percent versus 28 percent in all courses). This confirms what seemed to hold in the sample as a whole: namely, an inverse relation between size of enrollment and percentage of history majors. In other words, the courses that get the largest numbers do so by attracting non-history majors. The exception to this, however, is the French Revolution course, which on average depended more heavily on history majors than other courses and yet drew high enrollments. This suggests that, among history majors, it is the most attractive of all French history courses.

### **The Reasons for Success or Lack of Success**

In addition to answering the quantifiable questions, most respondents in 1989 also answered the questionnaire’s open-ended query: “To what do you attribute the success—or lack of success—of the French history course at your university?” Many of the explanations offered by respondents for their success were variations on five themes:

1. *Rising interest and enrollments in history.* Many believed that the success of their French history courses simply reflected the fact that enrollments in all history courses were up—“a rising tide lifts all boats”—and some attributed this to the reputations of their departments for good teaching.
2. *France is an inherently interesting country; French history contains inherently interesting material.* In addition, those teaching in some areas, notably Louisiana and eastern Canada, benefited from historic ties to France and intrinsic local interest in French culture.
3. *The Bicentennial of the French Revolution.* Not surprisingly, this was cited as helping enrollments in French Revolution courses during 1989.
4. *Strong programs in French language and literature and international studies.* At some universities, these served to feed students into French history. It should be noted, however, that French majors made up only 12 percent of the students in French history courses and international studies majors only 6 percent overall.
5. *Strong study abroad programs in France.*



However, the most common and confidently expressed reason for success was the skill and reputation of the professor teaching the course. One respondent emphasized the necessity of delivering “dramatic and passionate lectures” and the need to make the course “engaging, fascinating, and entertaining,” implying that he accomplished both of these. Eschewing false modesty, another professor forthrightly confessed, “I am consistently voted one of the university’s outstanding teachers.”

By contrast, no one attributed lack of success to poor teaching. Some, however, indicated that they were perceived as tough graders and their courses as hard or demanding. Other reasons for disappointing enrollments included:

1. *The parochialness of students; indifference or hostility to France.* One professor said her students consider the French ungrateful to America for liberating France in 1944.
2. *Lack of local ties to France or an “ethnic constituency”*—the mirror image of number 2 above.
3. *Weak or uncooperative French departments.* One professor complained that “the French language department here is so bad that students even take Latin to avoid it!”

Still others spoke of a shift away from national histories to thematic courses, loss of faculty in French history, or faculty spread too thin to give French history adequate coverage (a function of rising general history enrollments without an increase in staff).

## Conclusions

Although the numbers for 1989 look good, especially compared to 1981, there are also ominous signs. Several respondents indicated that they could not really fill out the questionnaire because they no longer taught an explicitly French history course. A shadow of decline is also cast by the numbers on frequency of offering (see table 1) which show an increase in the number and percentage of irregularly taught courses since 1981.

Then there is the nature of the sample, which, as indicated earlier, is hardly a random sample. It is hard to know who chooses to respond to a survey like this but, as a historian, I have a feeling that the “temper of the times” plays a role. In 1981, times were tough. America was in transition from the Carter “malaise” to the Reagan recession. College enrollments were hitting bottom, graduate programs were depressed, and careers in teaching were out of fashion. Pessimism was in vogue

and it seemed almost *de rigueur* to add one's voice to the litany of despair. Certainly there was no stigma attached to admitting lack of success. Perhaps this skewed the results of the 1981 survey toward bad news. By contrast, in 1989, after six years of supposed prosperity and the triumph of the "success ethic" of Donald Trump and his ilk, there was a widespread perception that things had gotten better and, if they had not gotten better for you, it was your own fault. Such a mood would tend to encourage those with good news to share it and those with bad news to keep it to themselves. Perhaps this was a factor in the apparent improvement in the survey results. In sum, I would like to think that things have gotten better for French history in general, but my considered judgment, after looking at all of the evidence, is that the upturn has been selective and that one should be cautious about expecting too much.

Still, there is a final, unmistakably hopeful sign in the survey results. Whereas in 1981 only three respondents reported plans to add new French history courses while six reported plans to delete, in 1989 twelve reported definite plans to add and nine reported tentative plans to add; only five reported plans to delete. In the never-ending struggle for existence among various subjects in the American and Canadian college curriculum, the French history course is at least surviving and reproducing. There seems to be no need, in the foreseeable future, to put it on the endangered species list!