Dear Members of the Westminster Community,

Since my appointment to Westminster School’s faculty in 1983, the History Department has remained my academic home on Williams Hill, so the article in this Bulletin featuring the department resonates with me personally. During three decades, I taught across the department’s offerings, including U.S. History, European History and World History.

My passion for history extends to my earliest memories as a student. I always seemed to enjoy studying history in school and reading books about it. As an undergraduate at Yale, I majored in history and continued that focus into my graduate studies at Wesleyan. History seemed to offer me a context that informed my understanding of current events and helped me better appreciate varying perspectives. While studying history, my teachers also impressed upon me the importance of analytical writing skills. Historical context and perspective complemented by lessons in analytical writing offer an enduring and rewarding pathway one chooses for a lifetime.

Nevertheless, teaching and learning history at Westminster has evolved in so many ways between the fall of 1983 and spring of 2017. In 1983, our classrooms had a traditional feel. With chalk in hand, teachers were in front of blackboards which stretched across the unpainted, cinderblock walls of Baxter Academic Center, while students sat in rows at individual desks. Although Baxter Academic Center was not built until the 1960s, teachers from the early days of Westminster School’s history would have found the scene familiar. Students were sectioned heterogeneously, and at the end of each term, we handwrote comments, pressing the pen forcefully, so as to be sure that all the carbon copies were legible. The History Department’s core offerings included Ancient & Medieval History, Modern European History, and United States History.

In 2017, our core department offerings include Global History and Society, 20th Century History, and United States History. These courses are supplemented by a variety of Advanced Placement and elective history and social science courses. To highlight just one curricular example, the difference between the scope and focus of Ancient & Medieval History and Modern European History in 1983 versus Global History and Society and 20th Century History in 2017 is significant. Ancient & Medieval History included some cultural and global topics but in only the context of the ancient world. Today, not only does Global History study people from around our planet, it also extends intentionally beyond political and diplomatic topics to consider worldwide cultural experiences, whereas 20th Century History narrows the chronology to a more focused consideration of this past century.

Our classrooms today, too, are entirely different, with more generous space for students and teachers, lots of natural light and pervasive technology. For instance, students and teachers utilize a learning management system for posting assignments and many other course materials, and in Armour Academic Center, an interactive whiteboard spans a wall in each classroom.

Students sit at shared tables, which accommodate flexible room arrangements so as to enhance discussion and group study. Teachers compose and submit comments and grades electronically, and those grades and comments are posted to parents electronically. While faculty from decades before would likely find the logistics that accompany teaching in the 1980s familiar, not so for faculty from the 1980s transplanted into 2017.

Regardless, the fundamental enterprise embraced by our History Department endures: teaching an appreciation for context and perspective along with analytical reading and writing skills. I believe that acquiring those skills is even more urgent today. Social media tend to offer comforting affirmations to those with shared perspectives, and the informal brevity of social media postings do not accommodate nuance. Further, the extraordinary access provided by our connected world assigns a heightened priority to acquiring the skills of inquiry necessary to discern the reliability of various sources. When I taught history classes, I often challenged my students to articulate opposing perspectives before arriving at firm convictions, since only by considering the perspectives of those with whom they might disagree could they appreciate relevant issues.

Another fundamental attribute that endures at Westminster is the multidimensional points of contact students enjoy with their teachers. Currently, as in 1983, our classroom teachers coach, supervise dormitory corridors and serve as student advisors, to offer just a few examples of the breadth of responsibilities typically balanced by my faculty colleagues. As a result, our teachers enjoy enriched relationships with their students. These relationships define the Westminster experience and underscore why alumni feel so passionately about this wonderful school. So as in so many ways at Westminster School, our History Department continues to move forward but at the same time continues to nourish the qualities which distinguish our school.

William V.N. Philip P’06, ’09
Headmaster