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Chief AP Reader

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Chief AP Reader

History professor Diane Vecchio has been busy engineering an event of historic proportions.

Every May, United States history professors and high school teachers from around the world converge on Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, to score hundreds of thousands of Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. history examinations taken by high school students. Successful completion of the exam allows the students to earn college-level credit before they get to college. As Chief Reader for the AP U.S. history program, Vecchio has masterminded the entire event for the past five years.

Last spring, 821 historians filled 107 tables, occupying four gymnasiums. They read from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for seven straight days and scored 255,900 exams.

But Vecchio's work begins long before the readers actually arrive in San Antonio. For starters, she must select 900 readers from an application pool of 1,400, along with "table leaders" to train them and "exam leaders" and "question leaders" to set scoring standards for each of the exam's five essay questions. Essays are scored on a scale of 0 to 9, with 9 being the top score.

Four days before the reading begins, Vecchio meets with exam and question leaders to read a representative sample of several thousand exams and establish criteria for grading each question. The readers are then trained and the reading begins.

The reading may seem calm and quiet, but behind the scenes, Vecchio says, "It's bustling. I'm running all day, from the minute we start."

To ensure that the readers finish scoring in seven days, Vecchio stays in constant contact with statisticians at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, N.J. Their communication enables her to keep track of reading rates — how fast each question is read and scored — and, if necessary, to rearrange readers and reassign questions.

But her work isn't over when each day ends. The week also functions as a professional conference, and Vecchio arranges professional and social events for the group.

When the reading is completed, Vecchio and two ETS specialists hold a videoconference with Princeton statisticians to decide who will receive AP credit according to the exam results. She also writes a number of follow-up reports.

In addition, she makes several trips to the College Board offices during the year to serve on the committee that creates the AP U.S. history curriculum and writes the exam.

Vecchio's colleague in the Furman history department (and first-time reader

Vecchio completing term as head of national program in U.S. history



The hundreds of historians who gather to read and score the AP U.S. history exam essays fill four gymnasiums at Trinity College in San Antonio, Texas.

COURTESY TOLLISON

last spring), Courtney Tollison '99, is impressed with how Vecchio has handled the position: "It's absolutely remarkable to think about the sheer logistics of organizing something like this. It's a very daunting task . . . but she does it beautifully."

Vecchio's years of experience with the program have contributed to her success as Chief Reader. She started in 1989 as a reader and later became a table leader and exam leader. She was named Chief Reader in 2000.

Her interest in the leadership role developed as she participated in the reading and thought of how she would improve it. "I thought of it as a major challenge, an organizational challenge and an administrative responsibility that I just wanted to get my hands in," she says. "Each year I've made major changes to improve it and to make the scoring more consistent."

Tollison credits Vecchio with improving communication, making the scoring process more efficient and creating a comfortable environment for an increasingly diverse readership. In particular, Vecchio has actively sought to include younger readers and more women readers.

Vecchio points out that, for years, male professors dominated the field of American history. "I've tried to bring more women into the reading and more women into leadership roles as table leaders and exam leaders," she says. She's also "rethought the social activities" in an effort to make them more inclusive.

Tollison says, "People have a great deal of respect for her and have been so happy with her leadership. She's an accomplished historian, she's very

articulate, she's a strong and effective leader, and she holds herself to the highest of standards. I think that's why people admire her so much."

After her final turn as Chief Reader this May, Vecchio, who joined the Furman faculty in 1996, anticipates having more time for her research. Her book, *Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women: Italian Migrants in Urban America*, will be published by University of Illinois Press later this year, and her current project examines Italian immigrants from two villages in southern Italy from the 1890s through the mid 1900s.

Nevertheless, her contributions as Chief Reader will continue to have an impact not just on the AP U.S. history program, but on Furman as well. As Tollison notes, Vecchio's role as Chief Reader has provided tremendous visibility for Furman.

"It's good for Furman to have the name of the university circulating among these well-respected historians, and it's great for Furman students in terms of graduate school," says Tollison. "It's also good because these are some of the world's best high school teachers teaching some of the brightest and most capable high school students in these AP classes. When you have the high school teachers becoming more cognizant of Furman, it's good all the way around."

— Karen Guth '01

The author, who holds a master's degree in religion from Harvard University, is spending this academic year as an intern in the Furman Chaplains Office.