

Department of History
April, 2009

Assessment of what students in the history major

The University of Oregon's History Department takes a multifaceted approach to setting out our expectations for what history majors will learn over the course of their undergraduate careers. It also uses a variety of measurements to assess students' success in attaining these goals.

I. Content: what we expect history majors to learn.

We expect students to acquire a body of historical knowledge that is both broad and deep. Our expectations in terms of content are expressed in the requirements for the history major. They are as follows:

A. Depth: all history majors must take a preponderance of their classes for the major at the upper-division level, and particularly at the 400-level. Of 45 graded credits students must take in History, 33 must be in upper-division courses, and at least 21 at the 400-level. The subjects of these 400-level classes are specialized enough in scope that students can both attain a degree of mastery of a period or topic and learn to appreciate the complexity of historical experience.

B. Geographical breadth: we require students to acquire a broad familiarity with at least three geographical regions of the world. In an increasingly interconnected world, this sort of broadening experience is invaluable. Concretely, we require students to take at least two courses (8 credits) in three of five areas: United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa, or Asia.

C. Chronological breadth: we strongly believe that all majors should acquire substantial historical knowledge of premodern history. This has several benefits. It is meant to encourage acquaintance with societies and cultures different from our own by virtue of their remoteness in time, which challenges the historical imagination and unsettles assumptions; for students whose focus is on modern history, it encourages depth in their area of interest; and in some cases, it promotes reflection on long-term historical trends. Thus, we require all history majors to take at least two courses (8 credits) that cover periods before 1800.

D. Cultural and linguistic breadth: we believe that history majors should be challenged to encounter at least one culture other than their own by learning its language. Thus, we require all history majors to successfully complete at least two years of college-level study of a second language.

II. Skills: what we expect history majors to be able to do

All history majors are expected to master a set of skills that we regard as crucial for historical thinking and, more broadly, as an integral part of a liberal arts education.

A. Historical argument: students must learn how to understand historical arguments and assess them critically. This includes evaluating conflicts of interpretation, examining the use of evidence, and learning how explanations are constructed in historical writing.

B. Inquiry: students must learn how to read primary sources and analyze them critically. At a higher level, they are expected to learn how to define a historical problem, identify primary sources relevant to that problem, and develop a research strategy to address a historical question.

C. Writing: students are expected learn how to synthesize information from a variety of sources, construct cogent arguments, and express them in clear, convincing prose. One indication of the high priority we place on expository writing is the fact that none of our courses employ scantron exams.

Our expectations for the development of these skills are made clear to students in two places: in the graded assignments for individual courses, and in the capstone requirement that all history majors complete a piece of original historical research in a History 407 seminar. (For more on the seminar requirement, see below.)

III. Assessment: how we determine whether history majors have met these objectives

The History Department assesses students' mastery of these goals in several ways:

A. At the level of the individual class, we assess student learning through graded assignments of a variety of types. We expose students to the reading and evaluation of primary sources beginning in our lower-division, 100- and 200- level survey courses and continue this into our upper-division, 300- and 400-level offerings. We likewise place a strong emphasis on writing, beginning in our lower-division classes. We promote learning in these areas and assess student performance by ensuring that our lower-division surveys provide weekly discussion sections in a small-group setting of 25 students or fewer, which enables us to provide a more individual assessment of students' progress. We devote substantial resources to maintaining these small-group learning environments.

B. We conduct and review the student course evaluations required by the UO Senate. Of course, these evaluations are only an indirect method of assessment; they provide an indication of what students *think* they have learned (or not learned). However, they can provide valuable information about how well students' learning experiences correspond with the goals we have set for them.

C. Finally, we require all history majors to complete a History 407 seminar, which centers on the writing of an original research paper based on primary sources. We ordinarily offer 14-16 of these courses each year, taught by faculty to groups of 13-15 students. Seminar topics range widely across the areas of our faculty's expertise. Students take History 407 late in their undergraduate careers, typically as seniors. The task of conceptualizing, researching, analyzing primary sources, and writing a seminar paper tests all of the skills we expect majors to have learned in the areas of historical argument, inquiry, and writing. It tests these skills not simply by repeating the way they have been taught and tested in other courses, but by asking students to confront a new challenge: to produce an original research paper that is both substantially larger in scope (15-20 pages) and more demanding in terms of conceptualization and organization.

IV. Next steps

The department can take steps to improve how it communicates its learning goals to our undergraduate majors. Currently, our expectations are embedded in the graduation requirements for history majors and in the variety of assignments in specific courses. Students would benefit from a clearer statement of our learning objectives, both for the history major as a whole at the level of individual courses. We propose to place a statement of the learning objectives outlined above in sections I and II on the department's website.

The History 407 seminar paper can be described as a capstone experience for history majors, if that term is understood to mean not simply a test of what has already been learned but an opportunity to apply acquired skills and knowledge to a more ambitious project. The department's Undergraduate Committee is charged with overseeing our undergraduate curriculum, including the history major. It will conduct regular reviews of student performance in History 407. It will also take into account instructors' assessment of how well our students come to History 407 prepared for the challenges it presents. It will review this information regularly and report to the department, proposing modifications of our curriculum as necessary.