

Macalester College History Department
Reconsidered Assessment Plan
February 2014

I. Department Student Learning Statement

The discipline of history investigates events and cultures of the past by focusing on specific historical eras, particular geographic areas, and/or compelling thematic issues. It uses a wide range of written, visual, oral and material evidence as the basis for constructing contemporary accounts about the past.

The Macalester history department seeks to serve an array of educational goals for both majors and non-majors. Our first priority is to teach students to think historically. We recognize that our courses cannot cover every time period or geographic area. Rather, we seek to examine the interpretive problems that historians encounter while practicing their own discipline and when interacting with other field of academic study and we encourage our students to apply the techniques of historical analysis to their study of the past and to the problems of the contemporary world.

As is expressed more fully in the learning goals, outcomes, and assessment strategies outlined below, our department hopes that students who progress through our major will have garnered an understanding of historical methods of analysis, will have experienced firsthand the craft of researching and writing historical studies, will have shared their research in public forums, and will have an appreciation of human diversity demonstrated through familiarity with cross-regional and cross-temporal histories.

II. Department Learning Goals and Outcomes

During the 2010-2011 academic year, the History department agreed on four major learning goals. After discussion in 2013-2014, we are reaffirming three of these as the major learning goals of our major, detailed below.

Learning Goal One: Our students will become acquainted with the many different ways that historians construct accounts of the past.

Learning Goal Two: Our students will become conversant with different approaches to textual analysis, with diverse forms of historical representation, with a wide range of conceptual frameworks, and with varied ways of assessing and interpreting evidence about the past.

Learning Goal Three: Our students will appreciate diversity in human experience through comparison across time (different historical eras) and space (different geographic regions).

The fourth learning goal we agreed upon in 2010 concerned the skills necessary to demonstrate mastery of these three learning goals. We are reaffirming our commitment to

this goal; however, given the new assessment language have opted to reframe this as essential Learning Outcomes as detailed below:

Learning Outcome One: Our students will become proficient in using a variety of research and informational tools.

Learning Outcome Two: Our students will become proficient in analyzing and evaluating historical arguments.

Learning Outcome Three: Our students will become proficient in developing and articulating their own historical questions and arguments in writing and in oral presentations.

Learning Outcome Four: Our students will become proficient in utilizing primary and secondary evidence to support their arguments.

Learning Outcome Five: Our students will become proficient in writing and speaking concisely and clearly.

III. Assessment Strategy

Overview:

Our department assessment strategies stem from our curricular framework. History majors are required to pursue a curriculum that directly reflects our three learning goals and five learning outcomes. As such, they are required to take courses that emphasize distinct historical eras and distinct geographical regions, structures that serve to help develop their appreciation for human diversity as well as become conversant in multiple approaches to historical study. Throughout the major, we also focus on historical practice.

While all our courses attend to skills such as primary source analysis, the construction of historical arguments, and original research, there are three distinct moments in which these learning outcomes are most stressed. These include History 379, The Study of History – a methods course preferably taken in the sophomore year, a second 300-level research seminar in which students are required to conduct original research (often based on published primary sources), and History 490, Special Advanced Topics, which serves as their capstone seminar.

A summary of these requirements can be found in the Macalester College catalog and also below under Learning Goal Three.

Our final moment of assessment comes during Senior Exit Surveys.

Individual Learning Goal Assessment Strategies

Learning Goal One: Our students will become acquainted with the many different ways that historians construct accounts of the past.

Assessment Strategies:

- i. As noted above, student progress through the major introduces them to multiple schools of historical study as well as regional historical traditions. The student's advisor and the Chair of the department assess their history course distributions to help meet this goal.
- ii. A critical moment in meeting this goal comes during History 379, "The Study of History." This required seminar, normally taken during the sophomore year, introduces traditional and contemporary modes of historical analysis to our majors. Students are introduced to multiple historical schools, ranging from as positivist, nationalist, and Marxist modes of historical analysis to postmodernism, gender history, and history of science. Students are asked to demonstrate knowledge of these schools through a variety of assignments. In recent years these have included an essay analyzing a contemporary event through the framework of a "traditional" school of history as well as a reflective essay concerning their own scholarly inclinations as a historian.
- iii. The course evaluations for History 379 include our general departmental evaluations as well as a supplement gauging student exposure to multiple schools of historical thought.

Learning Goal Two: Our students will become conversant with different approaches to textual analysis, with diverse forms of historical representation, with a wide range of conceptual frameworks, and with varied ways of assessing and interpreting evidence about the past.

Assessment Strategies:

- i. As with Learning Goal One, a critical moment in assessing student progress toward this goal comes during History 379, which introduces them to different approaches to textual analysis along with multiple conceptual frameworks and methodologies.
- ii. Student progress toward meeting this goal is also evaluated during their second 300-level research seminar, in which they are required to craft a mid-length research paper that uses a thematic approach to analyze primary texts, work with conceptual frameworks, and interpret evidence.
- iii. The final measure of student ability to master these skills comes during their completion of History 490, a Special Topics Seminar that counts as their capstone experience. Each capstone seminar focuses on a broad theme – such as gender history or transnationalism. Students are introduced to the current literature in this field and develop an extended research paper that situates a particular historical question within these recent debates. They are required to

conduct original research, often in archival sources or via published primary sources. As noted below, they also present their research to an audience of peers and faculty during a conference held at the end of the Fall semester.

Learning Goal Three: Our students will appreciate diversity in human experience through comparison across time (different historical eras) and space (different geographic regions).

Assessment Strategies:

- i. This goal is assessed throughout a student's progress through our major. To successfully complete a history major, the following courses must be completed:
 - [HIST 379 - The Study of History](#), which examines the different approaches and analytical frameworks of historical scholarship. Prospective majors are strongly encouraged to take "The Study of History" during their sophomore year.
 - In addition to [HIST 379 - The Study of History](#) students must also take a second 300-level History course, ideally before taking [HIST 490 - Special Advanced Topics](#).
 - [HIST 490](#) in the fall of their senior year, an advanced study seminar in which a major research paper is written. The college senior capstone requirement is to be met by completion of [HIST 490](#).
 - 4 credits in each of three geographic areas. The department normally offers courses in the following geographic areas: United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa, East Asia, and Middle East/Islamic World.
 - 4 credits in courses that deal primarily with the history of a period prior to 1800,
 - 4 credits in courses that deal primarily with the period since 1800,
 - Students who declare after August 1, 2012 must take at least 4 credits in global and/or comparative history.

A student's progress towards completing these requirements is assessed upon their declaration of a major, during which they fill out a major plan with their advisor, which is then approved by the Chair. Prior to graduation, a revised major plan must be approved by the Chair and filed with the college.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Overview:

Our learning outcomes reflect the skills that we hope our students will develop as they progress through the major. As with the learning goals outlined above, our students are assessed in each course not only through grading but also via our course evaluations specifically target progress toward writing, historical methodology and critical thinking. The touchstone courses (Hist 379 and Hist 490) are important moments to assess our students' ability to demonstrate their mastery of these outcomes, particularly regarding writing.

Individual faculty assess many of these outcomes during the course of a class. However, the department also administers course evaluations that ask students to evaluate their agreement with the following statements:

1. This course gave me the opportunity to become more proficient in my writing and/or speaking skills.
2. This course helped me understand the ways historians construct accounts of the past.
3. This course encouraged critical thinking.
4. The assignments gave me the opportunity to practice what I learned in this course.
5. I would recommend this course to other students.

Each of these questions (with the possible exception of #5) reflects our learning goals and outcomes. Individual faculty may and often do add additional questions, for example, questions asking students to evaluate a reading list for a new topics course. In addition, Hist 379 and Hist 490 feature additional questions geared to the goals of providing instruction in historical methods, historiography, research methods, and the writing of historical research. As such, they are important touchstone courses in our departmental assessment of our students' progress and our abilities to meet their needs.

Another crucial moment of assessment comes during the Senior Seminar Conference, held at the end of each Fall semester. This offers a chance for students to verbally present their advanced research in a public forum. Student performance in this conference is evaluated both by the instructors of their classes but also by other faculty from the History department. Each panel includes the moderation of a faculty member who fills out a survey that evaluates their research methodology, marshaling of evidence, speaking ability, the strength of their argument, etc.

The final moment of assessment has traditionally been through exit interviews conducted by the Chair. In 2010-2011, the department reevaluated this methodology as we felt these interviews were often formulaic and were potentially colored by how well the Chair and student knew or did not know each other. In 2012, we administered assessment surveys that measured student progress toward learning goals and outcomes, which we believe garnered more substantive and neutral feedback. Having studied our results last year, we are in the process of redesigning the surveys, which will be administered again this spring and will become the standard exit assessment tool in the future. These surveys will not only serve to gather neutral feedback but will also facilitate ease of comparison across years as we continue developing our assessment strategies.

LEARNING OUTCOME ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

Learning Outcome One : Our students will become proficient in using a variety of research and informational tools.

Assessment Strategy:

- i. As with several other goals and outcomes, our evaluation of student proficiency in research and informational tools is fostered as they progress through the curriculum, and forms a major component of their evaluation in Hist 379 and Hist 490. Our department's desire to strengthen these abilities led to a decision to change our major requirements recently to include a 300-level research seminar.
- ii. In each of these courses, professors add additional questions to their evaluations concerning the student's exposure and engagement with research and informational tools.
- iii. Most of these evaluation strategies are bound to specific coursework. In the case of research tools, the public presentations during the Senior Seminar Conference provide an opportunity for the faculty at large to evaluate the research, argument, and speaking skills of our students in a public forum.
- iv. Students evaluate their progress toward this learning outcome in the Senior Exit Survey.

Learning Outcome Two: Our students will become proficient in analyzing and evaluating historical arguments.

- i. Our writing assignments in Hist 379 and Hist 490 specifically require students to engage and evaluate historical arguments. While not mandated, a majority of our other courses also incorporate some degree of attention to literature reviews and other forms of evaluating historical scholarship.
- ii. Our regular course evaluations require students to note whether a course "helped me understand the ways historians construct accounts of the past." In assessing their progress (and our curriculum's ability to foster these skills) we plan to continue to evaluate their responses to this question across the curriculum.
- iii. The surveys at the Senior Seminar enable faculty to evaluate student abilities to analyze and evaluate historical arguments.
- iv. Students evaluate their progress toward this learning outcome in the Senior Exit Survey.

Learning Outcome Three: Our students will become proficient in developing and articulating their own historical questions and arguments in writing and in oral presentations.

- i. These skills are introduced in our introductory classes, reinforced in intermediate classes, and are central to student success in Hist 379, our 300-level research seminars, and Hist 490. By completing the major, students will therefore have been exposed to the skills necessary to articulate historical questions and arguments.

- ii. Our general evaluation form asks students to evaluate whether their courses “gave me the opportunity to become more proficient in my writing and/or speaking skills” as well as whether “the assignments gave me the opportunity to practice what I learned in this course.” Both of these elements are tailored to evaluate student ability to develop and articulate their own historical questions and answers.
- iii. The necessity to develop a research question, develop research, produce a rough draft, and revise a final version of a research paper at least twice during a student's history major (in 300-level seminar and in Hist 490) provides the opportunity to become proficient in developing and articulating historical questions. Their success in this regard is evaluated through their performance in the class.
- iv. A second, and integral, component of their evaluation in this regard concerns their ability to convey an argument orally. Many of our research seminars (and several intermediate classes) require oral presentations of research. These low-stakes presentations serve to develop these skills, which are formally evaluated in the Senior Seminar Conference as described above.
- v. Students evaluate their progress toward this learning outcome in the Senior Exit Survey.

Learning Outcome Four: Our students will become proficient in utilizing primary and secondary evidence to support their arguments.

- i. These skills are introduced in our introductory classes, reinforced in intermediate classes, and are central to student success in Hist 379, our 300-level research seminars, and Hist 490. By completing the major, students will therefore have been exposed to the skills necessary to articulate historical questions and arguments.
- ii. Our general evaluation form asks students to evaluate whether “the assignments gave me the opportunity to practice what I learned in this course” which is tailored to evaluating curricular engagement with using historical evidence.
- iii. Both research seminars and Hist 490 specifically require students to use both primary and secondary evidence to support a historical argument. Though not required, most of our introductory and intermediate courses also include similar assignments.
- iv. The surveys filled out by faculty during the Senior Seminar conference specifically address student ability to marshal evidence of this kind.
- v. Students evaluate their progress toward this learning outcome in the Senior Exit Survey.

Learning Outcome Five: Our students will become proficient in writing and speaking concisely and clearly.

- i. This learning goal is related to Learning Goal Three but focuses instead on the quality of writing and speaking clearly and concisely. It is evaluated at the same points and particularly emphasized during Hist 490. Students in this course are asked to develop multiple drafts of their capstone research

projects in which the professor not only focuses on content and argument but also on style. Moreover, students practice their oral presentations before the Senior seminar conference, receiving feedback from their professor and their peers.

- ii. The ability to verbally convey their ideas, concisely and clearly, is also a component of the faculty surveys following the Senior seminar.
- iii. Students evaluate their progress toward this learning outcome in the Senior Exit Survey.

IV. Assessment Review Calendar

Following departmental discussions, we have agreed to continue our discussion of departmental assessment according to the following calendar:

Learning Goals 1 & 2 will be reviewed in 2014, spearheaded by Ernesto Capello.

Learning Outcomes 1 & 2 will be reviewed in 2015, spearheaded by Lynn Hudson.

Learning Outcomes 3 & 4 will be reviewed in 2016, spearheaded by Jamie Monson.

Learning Outcome 5 and Learning Goal 3 will be reviewed in 2017, spearheaded by Karin Velez.