

## **History Department**

### **HISTORY DEPARTMENT CATALOG COPY (10 APRIL 2006)**

History is more than a catalogue of events and actors; it is an ongoing process of discovery and interpretation. All facets of human experience have a historical dimension – the power struggles of monarchs and presidents, the working lives of farmers, sailors, or seamstresses, the spiritual lives of slaves, the cultural assumptions of colonizers, the intimate relationships of families, to name only a few. Even the telling of history has a historical dimension, since historians often disagree about exactly how things happened in the past and why.

The variety of sources through which we understand history can encompass the full range of human expression as well – written documents, clothing, household items, artwork, advertisements, songs, buildings, and public monuments, among others. By studying primary materials and divergent interpretations of history, students acquire and develop analytical and expository skills: they learn to critique and interpret sources, sift through and organize information, formulate persuasive arguments, and express themselves with clarity and elegance. In addition to graduate study, these skills are indispensable for work in law, journalism, education, government, non-governmental organizations and business. The study of history affords many additional benefits. It expands and enriches our understanding of the diversity of human lives over time across such boundaries as gender, culture, class, race, region, and religion. It helps us think about how and why the world we know came to be and about our own places in it.

The history department at St. Lawrence offers courses in African, Asian (including Central Asian and Middle Eastern), European, Latin American/ Caribbean, and North American history. Additional opportunities are available to students for independent study in areas not directly covered by the curriculum. History majors can build on their interests through off-campus study by participation in local internships, semester or year-abroad programs, summer travel courses, and fellowships. In addition to working in and teaching languages other than English, many of us are actively involved in area studies, gender studies, and global studies, which offer minor concentrations for history majors.

### **HISTORY DEPARTMENT LEARNING GOALS (10 APRIL 2006)**

At the heart of the historian's craft is the critical reading and analysis of sources, which can encompass the full range of human expression – written documents, clothing, household items, artwork, advertisements, songs, buildings, and public monuments, to name just a few. By studying such materials, and divergent interpretations of history, students acquire and develop analytical and expository skills: they learn to interpret various kinds of sources, sift through and organize information, formulate persuasive arguments, and express themselves with clarity and elegance. A knowledge of history also expands and enriches our understanding of the diversity of human lives over time across such boundaries as gender, culture, class, race, region, and religion. It helps us think about how and why the world we know came to be and about our places in it.

As students develop a knowledge of a broad geographical area and/ or time period (in the case of survey courses) or pursue a narrower thematic or regional focus (in upper-division courses), they should learn to distinguish between primary and secondary sources so they can form questions that will allow them to understand the historical context of the sources' production – who created them, why, for whom, and with what effects. By studying history students should hone their ability to synthesize sources, understand key concepts, and identify historical patterns, continuities, and disjunctures. Students should develop a habit of relating their historical knowledge to contemporary concerns, cultivating a historically-based analytical temperament that they can bring to bear on present-day issues.

The desire and ability to question and critically analyze arguments are hallmarks of a successful history student. Students should come to understand that the telling of history has a historical dimension, since historians often disagree about exactly how things happened in the past and why. As they learn to identify in scholarly works the position and perspective of the author, the argument presented, and the evidence used to support it, students should become active participants in scholarly discussions. To join in historical debate, students must become good researchers: seeking out relevant scholarly sources to understand prevailing interpretations, finding relevant primary sources, and citing sources ethically.

History students should learn to communicate clearly and responsibly in venues such as class discussions, oral presentations, and writing. They should understand the role of evidence in supporting assertions and interpretations. To communicate in writing or speech, students must consider their goals and how best to achieve them. Students should be able to choose the most effective structure, evidence, and style to support their analysis and convey their ideas clearly. They should be able to follow assignment instructions, present information accurately, and acknowledge counterarguments and differing interpretations. They should be aware that the purpose of class discussion is not simply to get the “right answer” but to explore collaboratively the complex ways that texts illuminate the past. As discussion participants, readers, and audience members, students should be prepared and attentive, think carefully about the ideas and criticisms others offer, and respond thoughtfully and respectfully (whether agreeing or disagreeing).

To communicate effectively and ethically, students must understand that scholarly endeavor builds on the work of others in the context of a community of learners of which both faculty and students are a part. The integrity of this community can be maintained only by the full, honest, and appropriate acknowledgement of the sources of our data and ideas.

The goals outlined so far apply to all students who take history courses. The History Department’s specific goals for majors and minors do not differ qualitatively, but rather in terms of scope. Students who graduate with a degree in history should have examined major historical questions and historiographical analysis and interpretations of these questions in at least four of the broad geographical fields covered by the department: Europe, North America, Africa, Asia/ Middle East, and the Caribbean and Latin America. Over their course of study, history majors and minors should become increasingly sophisticated about the kinds of questions they ask, the methods they use to answer them, and the modes of expression they use to communicate them. They should be able to deconstruct, reconstruct, and assess arguments both orally and in writing. History majors and minors should learn to define a manageable research project, by articulating a clear research question, and then considering what sources might be helpful in answering it, where and how to obtain these sources, and how to weigh the value of each source for the project.

With these knowledge and skills goals in mind, history courses provide increasing specificity of subject matter, attention to historiographical debate, and emphasis on independent research and analysis as they move from the 100 to 400 level. The two courses required of all majors and minors – the pro-seminar (HIST 299) and the senior research seminar (HIST 489/ 90, our SYE) – are designed both to develop and to assess students’ skills as historians. In the former, students acquire a practical knowledge of historiography, the analysis of primary sources, and the means by which the two are integrated. In the latter, they undertake a major research project that includes a mastery of the subject’s historiography, analysis of available primary sources, and integration of these two components into a thoughtful final essay. At or near the culmination of their projects, students present their research findings to their colleagues.

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