GOALS FOR HISTORY MAJORS

The past is fleeting, passed down to us often only in fragmentary form. Whether that material consists of published accounts, personal diaries, eyewitness chronicles, or shards of pottery, the task of historians is to arrange these remnants into meaningful patterns based on the evidence at hand. The questions which guide historians’ pattern-making change in response to the exigencies of the present; yet, even as the questions change, historians seek to use this material to understand the nature of causality and change and continuity across time and geography. As interpreters of the past, they connect one account with another and identify the relationship between these particulars and the cosmic, as a great scholar once said. To study history is thus to make it. History majors hone this craft as researchers and writers, and they do so in the classroom, among other scholars, and as members of the community at large.

The members of the History Department at Bates College offer widely differing views of the history of a broad variety of peoples, yet they agree that the study of the past provides meaning in the present and informed choices for the future. We seek to acquaint students with a broad range of approaches to historical methodology and familiarize them with the ways in which historians have thought and written. At each level of study, our students hone their growing skills of evidence-based analysis, construction of arguments and the articulation of conclusions. In addition to teaching and to graduate studies in history and law, majors find careers in related fields, such as work in museums and archives, public service, indeed any profession requiring skills of research, analysis, and expression. Such knowledge of the past supplies context, perspective, and clarity in a diverse and changing world.

We teach history, both what historians have interpreted and how they develop those interpretations, in terms of the following categories of goals and objectives.

Understanding
Majors develop sensitivity to chronology and context, cause and effect. They learn how to interpret the relationships among events both in terms of their sequence but also in terms of how they are part of a larger network of relationships. This broader picture allows students to understand better how different peoples have shaped (and been shaped by) their worlds. This understanding includes the following skills:

- An empathy and respect for the people being discussed and also for the diversity of the human experience and the human record.

- An awareness that “the past is a foreign country” but also remains present in our contemporary world. This awareness of the “otherness” and the presence of the past, which exist in some tension, serve as an antidote to presentism: Not everything can be understood solely in terms of what is manifest today.

- An awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of one’s own perspective and the perspectives of primary and secondary sources. Together these perspectives inform a major’s understanding.
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- A clear presentation of that understanding. Majors should use effective, clear writing, including proper mechanics and citations, and they can speak lucidly about that writing. They develop a facility with multiple modes of presenting information, narrative, and argument. These may include written, oral, visual, and digital modes of presentation.

**Argument**
Presenting a clear narrative of one’s understanding of the past necessarily involves crafting an argument that interprets that past. A good argument depends on two things:

- A good question that the student then answers with the argument.
- A strong use of evidence (ideally from both primary and secondary sources) to support that argument.

**Use of Evidence**
An argument cannot exist without evidence. Using evidence effectively, however, involves more than just finding the details that fit one’s argument. Evidence is most convincing when it has been weighed against alternative explanations and when it has been assessed in terms of its larger context and meaning. To use evidence effectively, then, majors must be able to do the following:

- Demonstrate command of a body of knowledge.
- Select and employ primary and secondary sources with a critical awareness of their strengths and limitations.
- Understand how others have used the sources and how the topic has been interpreted over time. (This is known as historiography and in the context of a thesis or longer research paper might be called a literature review.)

**Process**
The past is a process. As should already be clear from the previous skills outlined above, so, too, is the work of interpreting it. A successful major needs to:

- Conduct independent research effectively.
- Respond well to critiques of work and also provide constructive criticism to others.
- Respond appropriately to challenges that arise when researching and presenting an argument.