

## Assessment Plan for the Department of History

### Introduction

The history department at Saint Mary's college serves two constituencies. The department's survey courses in World Civilizations and in the history of the United States are chosen by a majority of students to fulfill their history requirements for general education. The second constituency the department serves consists of those students who choose to be history majors. The missions for our general education courses and our upper division courses for our majors, while necessarily overlapping, are quite different.

General Education courses, while they *expose* students to the outlooks and skills used by professionals in the discipline, are not *primarily designed* to impart such skills. The General Education course when taught well should introduce students with no background in the discipline to a wide array of topics and skills in a manner that leaves the student intrigued and engaged and eager to learn more. It should endeavor to connect the information and skills learned in the semester to the student's present life in some way that demonstrates the value of remaining engaged in the discipline throughout one's life. It should leave the student desiring to take more classes in the discipline whether or not they ever manage to do so. The General Education course serves the interests of the liberal arts college best when the student completes the semester not simply with the arcane knowledge embodied in some disciplinary silo tacked on to the rest of the knowledge they are attempting to acquire, but when the student leaves the course enthusiastic about the very endeavor of becoming a widely and *generally* educated individual. We want our students to comprehend what understanding history can do for them, how it can help them in whatever field they wind up, how it can enrich their life.

While outcomes such as interest and engagement are not easily measured by the standard tools supplied by professional assessors, and in fact are frowned upon because of the difficulty of supplying the correct action verbs, the department is in the beginning stages of developing tools that might assess such qualities. A few will be outlined below along with the more standard tools.

The department's goals for its majors *are* designed to impart the knowledge, aptitudes, and skills used by professionals in the discipline. This is not to say that we expect all of our students to become professional historians. In fact we are well aware that the vast majority will choose other career paths. Given the state of the job market for PhD's, this is a very good thing. Consequently we also want to keep our eye on the broader goals outlined above even for our majors.

The department kept several key ideas in mind as it worked on this assessment plan. First, we wanted the plan to actually work for us. So we attempted to keep the ideas expressed here and the language in which they are expressed practical and workable. Having said that we also recognize that assessment has its own language, and we have attempted to conform to the language required by its "experts" wherever possible. Second, we imagined a graduate from the history department standing before us. What do we want her to be like? What do we want her to know? Who do we want her to be? We then asked ourselves, how will we know if she is what we want her to be? The following is an attempt to answer those questions in as practical a manner as possible.

Before breaking down the department objectives into learning outcomes and their specific assessment tools, it will be helpful to state in a general way the department's goals with its majors.

First, everything a professional historian does is done from a deep knowledge base. Genuine analysis of an issue and the critical thinking required to come to professionally acceptable conclusions are based on years of knowledge accumulation. We recognize that few undergraduates will attain the kind of proficiency in historical knowledge required to undertake historical analysis on a professional level. Nevertheless we see the undergraduate experience as instilling the initial building blocks of historical knowledge that will serve as a solid foundation if the student chooses to go on to graduate school. We expose our majors to a wide array of histories, different times, different lands, different peoples, both so that they will have a wide knowledge of the world, and so that they will better be able to decide what area of history interests them the most if and when they decide to continue their education. For the majority who do not attend graduate school in history, we trust that they will discover an interest in an area of the world that will keep them engaged for the rest of their lives.

Second, we want our majors to be committed to a life-long education and engagement with the most important issues that grip this country and the rest of the world. We want them to be politically active, or at least knowledgeably engaged with American and world politics. We want them to know why they believe what they believe, why they vote the way they vote.

We want our majors to be educated citizens of the world. They must understand their own history and what makes America and Americans unique. But they must also have a broad understanding of the major cultures and countries around the world, specifically Asia/China, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Our students must be equipped to be sensitive and insightful listeners to the rest of the world. This is simply one of the highest marks of an educated person in today's world. It should need no explanation why this is important. We do not want ethnocentric graduates. We want graduates who are able to think at a sophisticated level about America's place in the world.

Finally, we want our majors to be sophisticated wielders of the tools of the discipline of history. They must be able to analyze texts and arguments. They must be able to connect evidence to argument, both in thinking critically about the arguments of others and in crafting their own arguments. Our upper division classes and our senior seminar will require students to read a great deal, to think critically about what they are reading, and then to engage in original research and writing about a topic. We demand that our students become good writers, consequently our upper division courses focus a great deal on this discipline.

Ultimately, in the culminating experience in the major, the senior seminar, our majors will write a research paper based on primary sources that presents a well-reasoned historically-based argument. It will demonstrate solid writing skills, sound reasoning from and analysis of historical texts, and it will be presented in a professional manner as both a written paper and as an oral presentation. These are the primary skills upon which the profession of historian is based. Any student wishing to go on to graduate school must excel at these skills and this art. Individually and collectively these are skills which, when done well, will advance a student in virtually any career she chooses.

Saint Mary's College desires to equip women to change the world. By creating life-long engaged citizens of both this country and the world, the history department will be contributing to that goal.

What follows is an attempt to rephrase and reform the ideas expressed above in a manner that more closely matches the college's language of learning outcomes and assessment.

General Learning Outcomes for the Bachelor of Arts, Major and/or Minor in History

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| History LO1) | A Saint Mary's history major identifies and understands salient developments in world and United States history.  |
| History LO2) | A Saint Mary's history major analyzes the historical development of human cultures in their response to their physical, social, intellectual, and political environments and seeks explanations for those developments.   |
| History LO3) | A Saint Mary's history major identifies and understands evidence of historical change from primary sources/records of the past and assesses historical interpretations in secondary sources.  |
| History LO4) | A Saint Mary's history major analyzes how her assumptions about human identity have been influenced by her historical context, and how human identities have been constructed in history.   |
| History LO5) | A Saint Mary's history major researches topics of historical interest based upon critically assessed primary sources and significant secondary sources representing the state of knowledge in the field.  |
| HistoryLO6)  | A Saint Mary's history major constructs and critiques her own historical interpretations, based upon a substantial body of research and convincing use of appropriate historical evidence.  |
| History LO7) | A Saint Mary's history major presents her research and historical arguments in a clearly structured, convincing, and professionally acceptable manner in oral presentations.  |
| History LO8) | A Saint Mary's history major writes major research papers following the appropriate professional standards in the historical discipline. Her work displays a clear and convincing writing style and an appropriate understanding of grammar and the principles of writing composition. She writes research papers with a clearly stated thesis, reflecting her interpretation of her research, and a convincingly constructed logical argument in defense of that thesis. She articulates her argument and presents her evidence clearly. |

Learning Outcomes for the Bachelor of Arts, Major in History, Concentration in Women's History and Minor in Women's History

In addition to the eight learning outcomes cited above, the student with a concentration in Women's History or a Minor in Women's History is able to do the following.

- History LO9) A Saint Mary's history major with a Concentration in Women's History understands the history of feminist movements and women's contributions to knowledge and achievement.
- History LO10) A Saint Mary's history major with a Concentration in Women's History understands the intersectionalities of gender, race, class, sexualities, and other identity categories from historical and contemporary transnational perspectives.
- History LO11) A Saint Mary's history major with a Concentration in Women's History understands and can articulate feminist theoretical concepts and terminology.
- History LO12) A Saint Mary's history major with a Concentration in Women's History evaluates sources, analyzes discourse, and considers context from a feminist perspective, using feminist methodologies to conduct research about women's history. She examines and critiques cultural representations and claims about women and gendered identities.
- History LO13) A Saint Mary's history major with a Concentration in Women's History uses gender analysis to understand the complex ways in which race, class, religion, and gender come together in different historical moments and places to shape women's identities.

Link Between Departmental Learning Outcomes and the College's Four-Year Liberal Learning Outcomes

The Student Learning Outcomes for the Major in History are related to the Four-Year Liberal Learning Outcomes for all students at the College in a variety of ways. The following is an analysis of some of the most important connections among them.

**LO1. Knowledge Acquisition and Integration of Learning**

Catholic education in the liberal arts tradition values knowledge for its own sake and affirms the interconnectedness of all learning. Therefore...

A Saint Mary's student exhibits sound knowledge of the formation of human identities, the development and functioning of diverse cultures and social groupings, the practice of creative artistry, the multi-faceted nature of religion and the Catholic tradition, the complexity of fundamental philosophical questions, and the intricate workings of the natural world.

A Saint Mary's student demonstrates the ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives, recognizing the effect that differences in areas such as gender, religion, values, culture and privilege can have on the ways that people interpret and act in the world; and she makes connections across disparate settings and areas of study.

History LO1, History LO2, and History LO4 achieve the College Learning Outcomes in this category in their emphasis on analyzing the historical development of human cultures, the diversity of settings and cultural components of those cultures, and the construction of human identities over time.

In the Major in History with the Concentration in Women's History, History LO9, History LO10, History LO12, and History LO13 also achieve these Learning Outcomes in their focus on gender, values, culture, and the role of privilege.

All of these History Learning Outcomes also ask our majors to deal with cultural diversity, to consider the various ways in which "people interpret and act in the world," and to make connections across disparate settings.

## **LO2. Cognitive and Communicative Skills**

As a women's college, Saint Mary's emphasizes the value of women's voices and their distinctive contribution to intellectual life. Therefore...

A Saint Mary's student masters a broad set of sophisticated intellectual skills, including critical thinking, careful interpretation of complex texts and artifacts, accurate evaluation of data, investigative problem solving, quantitative reasoning, historical analysis, as well as technological, media, and information literacy. She reflects analytically on her experience as a woman, on the contributions of women's voices, and on constructions of gender.

A Saint Mary's student communicates her ideas, insights, thought processes, and conclusions with accuracy, competence, and style in various media and contexts.

Again, there is significant, deliberate, and appropriate overlap between the College Four-Year Learning outcomes and the History Learning Outcomes in the area of cognitive and communicative skills. In History LO3 the history major's use of primary sources and secondary texts to assess historical evidence and interpretations parallels the College Learning Outcomes in critical thinking, careful interpretation of complex texts and artifacts, accurate evaluation of data, and investigative problem solving. In History LO4, majors examine their own assumptions and question the construction of human identities in history. In History LO5 and LO6, their research, interpretations, and critiques thereof, parallel the College learning outcomes. In History LO7 and History LO8, which represent not only classroom work, but also the capstone experiences of the Senior Seminar research paper and the Senior Comprehensive oral presentation, the history major will be assessed on communicating "her ideas, insights, thought processes and conclusions with accuracy, competence, and style in various media and contexts."

Particularly in the area of women's voices, the History Major with the Concentration in Women's History is a conspicuous example of the leading role that a women's college can take in acknowledging the contributions of women's voices and studying the constructions of gender. A major goal for the History Department in the establishment of the Concentration and Minor in Women's History was to prepare our students to move into graduate programs in women's history or women's studies with the best preparation possible. Although the program is relatively new, it is flourishing, and one student has already been accepted into a doctoral program to study women's history. History LO9, LO10, LO11, LO12 and LO13 all require the major to reflect "analytically on her experience as a woman, on the contributions of women's voices, and on constructions of gender."

### **LO3. Intercultural Competence and Social Responsibility**

Furthermore, as a Catholic women's college, Saint Mary's fosters respect and compassion for all people and honors leadership that improves the human community. Therefore...

A Saint Mary's student develops reflective and collaborative skills that enable her to learn from and participate in dialogue with diverse people and cultures. She does this by attaining competence in another language and by study and experience that reveal both cultural differences and the connections joining people in a global society.

In keeping with the mission of the Sisters of the Holy Cross and their stance in solidarity with the poor and powerless, a Saint Mary's student will evaluate social conditions, discern human needs, and be able to respond as an agent of change.

In particular, the role of the GenEd courses in the History Curriculum contributes significantly to the achievement of the College's Learning Outcomes in LO3. Majors are required to take the entire sequence of World Civilization and United States History. They study cultural difference and diversity in both World Civilizations I and II and in United States History 201 and 202. In all of these courses there is a major social justice component relative to studying and understanding the poor and powerless, and learning to evaluate social conditions and discern human needs. In some courses, there is also an emphasis on being able to respond as agents of change.

The History Department Learning Outcomes also contribute to the achievement of the "Six Sub-Outcomes Partially Fulfilled by the Major."

#### **LO1: Integration-Synthesis:**

A Saint Mary's student synthesizes examples, facts, issues, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective into a coherent whole.

A history major achieves these learning outcomes in a variety of courses and assignments. Most particularly, the major goal of professional historians is to create and assess interpretations that deepen our understanding of important historical events, themes, and issues. There are always a variety of

perspectives to take into consideration in this research, and there will be a great deal of evidence that must be weighed and sifted to determine what evidentiary claims can be made. The history major will synthesize examples, facts, issues or theories through course readings, lectures, research, and writing in the field. The capstone of these educational experiences will be synthesizing the materials necessary for the major senior project, the senior seminar paper.

**LO2: Critical Thinking:**

A Saint Mary's student employs various aspects of critical thinking--interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation--in her intellectual work.

A history major must in principle develop her critical thinking skills in order to both comprehend and emulate the standard practices of professional historians. She will begin with a complex historical situation which she must analyze and try to understand. By analysis, the student understands breaking a complex and difficult situation, in principle in a different time and often in a very different culture, into its important components. This will also involve evaluating her sources for accuracy and bias. She will then seek to understand the relations among those component parts in a manner that clarifies and throws light on the historical problem she is trying to understand. She will make inferences based on those analyses and evaluations, and in the end, use her evidence to present her best explanation of the meaning of her historical problem. Her interpretation concerning what explains the significance of her historical problem will be her intellectual understanding. In all of her history courses, she should be asked to consider and evaluate other historical interpretations, weighing them for accuracy, insight, and depth.

**LO2: Writing Competence:**

A Saint Mary's student employs conventions of academic writing to formulate meaningful claims, construct effective arguments, and employ evidence appropriately. She communicates her ideas in writing with precision and style.

A history major must turn in a Junior Portfolio, consisting of three papers written in her history courses, before she is admitted into the Senior Seminar, which is the capstone experience for the major. At least one of these papers must be a major research paper with a strong thesis that is convincingly supported by her argument in support of that thesis. She will also need to observe the correct professional conventions of the field, in this case the Chicago Style that is the standard for practicing historians. In her history courses, she will have had to write a variety of papers in which she will have been asked to analyze historical material, formulate a position, or report on historical research topics. She will be assessed on both style and content, in order to ascertain her preparedness for the Senior Seminar. If she is not prepared, she will work through the summer before her senior year with the professor of the Senior Seminar until they determine she is prepared to be in the capstone course. The Senior Seminar is a course in which the important learning outcome is the production of a twenty-five to thirty page research paper based on primary and secondary sources, with a clear thesis and convincing use of

evidence in her argument in support of her thesis. It must be structured in a professional manner, and the professor will act as her mentor in guiding her through the research and helping her develop the appropriate professional skills. In her Senior Seminar project, she will be expected to communicate her ideas with clarity and precision, in a style that renders them interesting and convincing for her reader.

#### **LO2: Oral Competence**

A Saint Mary's student orally communicates with clarity, organization, supporting information, credibility, and style.

The Senior Comprehensive has been recently changed to an oral presentation in order to more adequately train our majors for one of the major tasks of the professional historian, presenting a research paper at a conference. In the Senior Conference, they now present the results of their research in the Senior Seminar in a talk that is judged according to both the content of their research and the style of their presentation. They are assessed according to whether they present within the prescribed time frame, articulate and support their thesis well, and engage their audience. This will prepare them not only for giving a professional paper, but also for any oral argument they will need to make to present a convincing interpretation or point of view in whatever field they may pursue.

#### **LO2: Problem Solving**

A Saint Mary's student uses her knowledge to design, implement, and evaluate a strategy to reach a goal or solve an unscripted problem.

The historian's task is much like that of the detective. The history major will begin her research project with an open-ended task. What will she need to do to gather the research materials necessary to understand her chosen topic? Most importantly, this need to create a strategy to find her information has often taken our students into archives across the nation, where they deal with original documents, read contemporary newspapers and journals on microfilm, and sometimes interview those who witnessed or participated in important movements or events.

#### **LO2: Information Literacy**

A Saint Mary's student determines the extent of her information need and obtains, evaluates, and uses information effectively with an understanding of economic, legal, ethical, and social issues surrounding information use.

The history major achieves this learning outcome in the course of her research, as she must both find and evaluate the information necessary to her historical understanding. Historians begin with the facts, and they must choose them wisely and use them well. To quote E. H. Carr from his Trevelyan Lecture at Cambridge University, *What is History*,



It is no doubt important to know that the great battle was fought in 1066 and not in 1065 or 1067, and that it was fought at Hastings and not at Eastbourne or Brighton. The historian must not get these things wrong. But when points like these are raised, I am reminded of Housman's remark that "accuracy is a duty, not a virtue." To praise an historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work, not his essential function ... . These so-called basic facts which are the same for all historians commonly belong to the category of the raw materials of the historian rather than history itself.

Obtaining the important information and using it accurately and well is the necessary condition of the historian's work. History majors are assessed on that skill throughout their career as majors.

### Assessment tools

History Learning Outcomes are assessed through various pedagogical techniques in the classroom, in assignments, and in the capstone requirements for the major. Instances of such assessment as found in different history courses will be presented as follows. All history majors are required to take the two introductory sequences in World Civilization and United States history. In these four courses they are tested on their grasp of this introductory material, and whether they have learned to "identify and understand salient developments in world and United States history," as called for in History LO1. They will build on and deepen this knowledge in later upper division seminars, but this is their comprehensive background.

Even at this introductory level assignments and exams are designed to both get students engaged and interested as well as to teach them at a rudimentary level the skills of the historian. Professors try to assign books that are proven to engage undergraduates, even to excite them. They assign research projects designed to not only teach research methods but hopefully to genuinely interest them in the prospect of such research. An example might be an assignment that has students comparing the messages sent women in women's magazines from the 1950s to messages sent in women's magazines today. Most exams in the introductory classes are built around essays designed to instruct students in crafting a brief argument with a thesis and substantial support. General education courses require the constant attention of the professor to make sure the topics chosen for classroom discussion, chosen from the myriad of possible options, are topics that will draw the general student into the discipline in a way designed to get them asking questions and desiring further conversation and illumination. If students in general education classes are left wanting more, the professor has done his or her job well.

History LO2 is addressed in a variety of ways by different professors in the History Department. For example, it is addressed by the daily analytical writing assignment based on the readings, and group work in the classroom when the reading is discussed, in Professor Hamilton's World Civilization and United States history surveys, as well as her upper division seminars. By receiving the written assignments on the readings the night before they are discussed in class, Professor Hamilton can assess the student's level of comprehension. She will know that she needs to focus on some aspects of the readings they did not grasp, relative to needing less time to address those they understood well. She can

then craft questions for group work that require them to consider those areas that need more clarification. Formative assessment is critical in such techniques, as the goal is to assess the student's comprehension of the material and critical thinking abilities in real time, with an eye towards classroom adjustments to address areas of strength and weakness. Assessment is considered 'formative' when the feedback from learning activities is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet the learner's needs. This student centered activity enables Professor Hamilton to develop a student's critical thinking abilities independently, rather than provide them with information to be memorized through direct instruction. This daily formative assessment is critical to not only seeing that they understand the material, but allows her to address History LO3 and LO4 as well.

Professor Svelmoe would assess student learning formatively by a form of interactive lecture, where he asks questions to draw out material and deepen the student's understanding through dialogues that evoke answers and thought processes that deepen their understanding of the material. Professor Miguda would ask students to analyze primary sources, such as cartoons and excerpts from texts, in group work in the classroom. Different groups would report on their conversation, sharing insights and revealing the multiplicity of ways in which students understand these documents and artifacts.

Writing assignments are a major means of assessing the history major's progress. Professor Stefancic asks students to write a book review, but a book review written from the perspective of a historical contemporary, thus gaining a different critical perspective. Reflective and bibliographical essays are used to assess student understanding not only of the classroom material, but also their ability to assess the value of historical writings and grasp the problems and directions in a particular research area, addressing History LO5.

Most importantly, research papers and oral presentations are required in a variety of classes, assessing History Learning Outcomes LO5, LO6, LO7, LO8, LO9, and LO10. Every fall semester, Professor Hamilton assigns a research project to be presented orally, and the format and rules for this presentation are the same as those for the Senior Comprehensive Conference. This is designed to prepare history majors over time for their capstone experience in the Senior Conference, hone their skills, and build their confidence. In the spring, she assigns a fifteen page research paper, which is a mini version of the senior seminar project. Students are required to research a topic and develop a thesis concerning that area of research. They must present the thesis clearly and structure an argument in support of their interpretation of the material in the body of the paper. They are required to submit at least one draft, construct a substantial scholarly bibliography, and follow the conventions of Chicago Style citation correctly. Other faculty offer the same or similar opportunities for research and writing.

The department is considering *requiring* juniors to write a research paper of substantial length in at least one of their junior level courses. The student will be permitted to choose which course she writes the paper in. It might be in a course which requires a research paper, such as Professor Hamilton's, or it might replace a shorter assignment in another class, if the student decides they want to write their junior level research paper in that class. Like the W program, the student would earn their RP, or some such thing, and the department would record that they had done so and in what class the RP was earned. This paper would then be a required part of the Junior Portfolio. The reason for making the

junior research paper a mandated part of the history major is so that students will enter the senior seminar with a shorter research experience already under their belts.

### Results and Use of Results

The results of assessment techniques vary in different courses. Common to all courses are tests to ensure that students meet the course appropriate learning outcomes for History LO1. Also common to many courses are writing assignments crafted to assess specific goals. To assess critical thinking, for example, Professor Hamilton assigns her freshmen courses a thought experiment paper entitled “What is History?” as a capstone for the course. Students have spent all semester absorbing information, but also dealing with different interpretations of its meaning and controversies over the very nature of history itself. Their final project is to articulate what all their work has meant to their understanding of history, using a case study from the class to illustrate their point. Another example would be the oral history project in HIST324 “The History of Women in the United States.” This research project requires them to investigate the lives of three generations of women in their own families, using them as case studies in the creation of gendered identities and addressing History LO8, LO9, LO10, LO11, LO12, and LO13.

The major assessments of History Learning Outcomes LO5, LO6, LO7, and LO8 are provided by the two capstones of the senior written research paper, which satisfies their Advanced Writing Requirement, and the oral presentation of that research in the Senior Conference, which satisfies their Senior Comprehensive Requirement. Results of these assessments have changed department practices and requirements in the history curriculum. When faculty determined that students needed more training and experience with major research projects in order for them to achieve the learning outcomes set for those projects, a Junior Portfolio was instituted. The Junior Portfolio is assessed on both the strength of its historical research and the quality of the student writing, including both correctness and style. Students work on their portfolio with help from their professors in the second semester of their junior year, receiving feedback on their research and writing. Most recently, assessment of the Senior Comprehensive presentation has led the faculty to question whether they want to institute a research methods course with a component to specifically train students in professional techniques for delivering papers. This course may be presented to the Curriculum Committee this semester.

### Assessment Strategies in the Planning Stages

The department has several plans which it will seek to explore and perhaps implement over the next year. These are ideas originating from a brainstorming session where part of the time was spent trying to figure out ways to measure elusive categories such as interest and engagement. The plans are simply listed below.

1. Junior –level research paper as indicated above
2. Research methods course as indicated above
3. An exit interview/survey for seniors which would include a section designed to measure interest and desire to continue as engaged citizens. Before and after surveys might also be used in general education courses to measure qualities such as interest and engagement.

4. Students will often, of course, tell you what you want to hear on a survey, so more substantial measures might be used. If the funds could be found, an email subscription to the NYTimes or a subscription to "The Week" might be provided students at the beginning of the year. Statistics could be kept as to how many students continued their subscriptions on their own after the class ended. This would provide a real-life investment answer to the question of sustained engagement.
5. The final assignment in a class might be designated as open-ended. The professor will pass out the usual assignment, but then offer students the option of exploring something on their own if they wish in a manner comparable to the regular assignment. The percentage of students taking up such a challenge might be at least suggestive of interest and engagement.
6. A one unit class called Current Events and History might be offered. This class would be team taught, rotating professors with strengths from around and even outside the department. The topics would change every semester depending on what was going on in the world. How such a class was received would indicate at some level interest and continuing engagement as well as model for students the importance of simply keeping up with what is going on in the world and how academic disciplines will help them in practical ways to understand world events. Such a class might coordinate closely with CWIL and other such campus institutes.
7. The department also believes that the Senior Seminar should include a substantial historiography component, but to do so the course will need to be increased from a 2-unit to a 3-unit course.