



MEASURING COLLEGE LEARNING

IN HISTORY

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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL

Measuring College Learning Project

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About this White Paper:

This white paper emerges from the Social Science Research Council's Measuring College Learning Project and is part of a larger collection of work, entitled *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century* (Jossey-Bass 2016). This material is reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Improving Quality in American Higher Education outlines the fundamental concepts and competencies society demands from today's college graduates, and provides a vision of the future for students, faculty, and administrators. Based on a national, multidisciplinary effort to define and measure learning outcomes—the Measuring College Learning project—the book presents a series of "essential concepts and competencies" for six disciplines. These essential concepts and competencies represent efforts towards articulating a consensus among faculty in biology, business, communication, economics, history, and sociology—disciplines that account for nearly 40 percent of undergraduate majors in the United States. Alongside these essential concepts and competencies, the book articulates a creative vision for the future:

- Clarify program structure and aims
- Articulate high-quality learning goals
- Rigorously measure student progress
- Prioritize higher order competencies and disciplinarily grounded conceptual understandings

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Measuring College Learning in History

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This contribution advances a case for why historians must come together not only to articulate the value of historical study but also to demonstrate its value with evidence. The authors argue that today's students should develop a deep understanding of history as an interpretive account, the relationship of past and present, historical evidence, complex causality, and historical significance. In addition to mastering these essential concepts, today's history undergraduates should learn how to evaluate historical accounts, interpret primary sources, apply chronological reasoning, contextualize, and construct acceptable historical accounts. Following their in-depth discussion of learning outcomes, the authors review existing history assessments in K–12 and higher education. These include well-known tests like the Advanced Placement history tests and newer tools such as the Stanford History Education Group's Beyond the Bubble assessments. The authors conclude with a vision for the future of assessment in the discipline of history.

and how one becomes so, especially when that effort is led by historians. Now that Tuners have put substantial time and effort into defining history learning goals for their departments and worked to adapt their curriculums to achieve them, they will want to find meaningful ways to evaluate whether their efforts have improved student learning. This should make Tuners a receptive audience for tools that can help guide them in further program revisions. More than that, we expect Tuners to be participants and leaders in efforts to develop more authentic assessments of student learning in history.

Essential Concepts and Competencies for the History Major

History primers, cognitive scientists, and the AHA Tuning Project have articulated comprehensive lists of student learning outcomes for history majors. We build on and advance this conversation by identifying a focused set of *essential concepts and competencies* that history faculty see as fundamental to the discipline, important enough to emphasize given limited time and resources, and valuable to students' lives. Focusing on a smaller number of outcomes enables more careful attention to how these core disciplinary goals can be learned, including more rigorous, targeted, and meaningful assessment. Moreover, framing these learning outcomes as *concepts* and *competencies* encourages historians to distinguish carefully between abilities and the conceptual understandings students must have to exercise those abilities.

In selecting these essential concepts and competencies, we looked for patterns of agreement in primers, cognitive science research, and current Tuning efforts. We relied on the input of the diverse historians in the MCL faculty panel, engaging with them in an iterative process of list making, feedback, winnowing, and further revision. Searching for areas of consensus in the field, we aimed to pinpoint *essential* outcomes, not a comprehensive list of

markers defining expertise in history. Consequently, our list likely leaves off concepts and competencies that individuals or departments deem important. In that event, they can and should articulate these additional outcomes and develop methods of assessment for them.

Perhaps the most obvious omission from our list is historical content knowledge. Clearly, historians value factual information about the past and consider subject matter literacy an important goal in their teaching. Furthermore, historical thinking requires content to function; historical concepts and competencies cannot be developed or practiced in a vacuum. The problem with including content knowledge as a goal for assessment is the question of *which* knowledge to test. Although histories of the United States and Europe once held privileged places in the curriculum of most colleges and universities, many departments no longer require immersion in these subjects. Instead, they encourage concentrations in other geographic areas and exploration of new thematic fields and faculty specializations. Thus, any attempt to build a test on a particular national history or to privilege particular regions or periods likely would meet with significant controversy. Furthermore, it is the conviction of many historians that no particular history *ought* to be privileged because historical thinking, the ultimate purpose of undergraduate history instruction, can be fostered in sustained study of any historical content. Within our MCL group we had passionate debates about content, specifically whether one's national history should have a privileged place. With no consensus possible and remembering that we were not attempting to be comprehensive, we decided to exclude any specific subject knowledge from the essential concepts and competencies.

Concepts

Having reviewed what others before us have said in the ongoing conversation about history learning outcomes, we find the following

concepts are most essential for specifying what undergraduate history students should know at the completion of a course of study.

History as an Interpretative Account

Students must understand that history is not simply what happened in the past unmediated by human sense-making. Rather, it is an interpretative account of the past constructed through a disciplined process of problem solving and supported by evidence that survives. Because we cannot apprehend the past through applications of mathematics, formal logic, or controlled experimentation, in historical accounts problem solving is usually verbal, with conclusions presented in the form of a narrative or an analytic argument developed in relation to particular questions, forms of evidence, and existing interpretations. Students must understand that when historians construct accounts their goal is not to reach a universal standard of validity or correctness as in the case of logical and mathematical proofs. Rather, the object is to convince an audience that an account of the past is highly acceptable. Evaluation of historical accounts occurs by examining the acceptability of the information provided as evidence, the extent to which the information supports the account, and the quality of counterarguments or alternative positions that may be offered. Both accounts and evaluations of accounts are influenced by historians' own beliefs, theoretical orientations, and other factors. Resting on interpretive accounts, it is the nature of historical knowledge to have relatively less certainty and more heterogeneity in how questions are answered than knowledge in some other disciplinary domains. This also means that historical knowledge is not fixed for all time. Rather, we can expect historical knowledge to be mutable. Historical knowledge is constantly being revised as new evidence comes to light and new generations ask different questions and attend to different constraints on our ability to know the past.

The Relationship of Past and Present

Students must understand the complex relationship between past and present. Acceptable sense making of the past walks a balance between two states of mind: familiarity and strangeness. Often, we are motivated to study the past when we become aware that the world we live in today is a product of past events and developments that continue to shape contemporary life. This is the *presentness of the past*. But since nothing in time stands still, the passage of time makes strange what once seemed ordinary. Therefore, historians also emphasize the *pastness of the past*, that is, recognition of the differences that separate our own time from the past. Being mindful that the past is a foreign country cautions us to not assume we have an intuitive understanding of historical actors, projecting our own values and assumptions onto people of different times and places. Instead, recognizing the pastness of the past directs historians to understand people of the past by contextualizing their actions: what they were trying to accomplish; the nature of their beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge; the culturally and historically situated assumptions that guided thought and action. Situating people, events, and sources within the context of their time is a primary mission of historical sense making. Furthermore, examining the past gives a sense of the abnormal present; in other words, it helps to destabilize what we might take for granted in the present and help us view the present moment with critical perspective. Mediating between the pastness of the past and the presentness of the past gives people with a historical perspective a reflective self-awareness that actively searches for the plausibility of beliefs and actions different from their own.

Historical Evidence

Students must understand that the acceptability of historical accounts depends a great deal on how evidence is used to support claims about the past. Sources of evidence are categorized as either

primary or *secondary*. Primary sources are the raw materials for the study of the past originating from the time under study. Secondary sources are interpretive accounts of the past that historians use to generate new questions, corroborate conclusions, and test interpretations. Students should understand that the classification of a source depends on its use for a particular historical question. For example, a historical account of ancient Rome written during the 1950s would be a secondary source if the historical question is about ancient Rome and the source is used to ground an interpretation, or it could be a primary source if one is asking a historical question about the intellectual climate affecting historians in the 1950s. Students should understand the nature, potential, and limits of both kinds of evidence. In particular, students should know that primary sources come in diverse forms, represent diverse perspectives, and have distinct strengths and limitations as evidence about the past. They will avoid the misconception that primary sources are exact, unproblematic reflections of the past. Critically, students must understand that reading primary sources for evidence demands a different approach than reading them for information. Acceptable interpretations of the past require that primary source evidence be examined both for content and its unwitting testimony, that is, what the source says without directly saying it. This requires asking questions about their provenance and historical contexts and using the answers to constrain interpretations of the evidence.

Complex Causality

Students must understand that in contrast to disciplines that seek to isolate factors and reduce explanations to singular causes, history understands change over time to be complex and interconnected. Considerations include not only human agency but also structural, environmental, and other factors that play a role in stimulating, shaping, and resisting change. Thus, historical accounts are multiple

and layered, avoiding monocausal explanations and reductionist thinking. They distinguish significant from insignificant causes and proximate from long-term, enabling conditions. Causes put forward to explain an event (and the priority of causes) may differ based on the scale of the history and the approaches of the historian.

Significance

Students must understand what makes something historically significant. Since the past is everything that happened before now, including everything that humans anywhere have thought, said, and done, no history can include all of the past. Therefore, the concept of significance is used to make choices about what subjects are worth remembering and constructing accounts about, what is worth including in an account, and what can be left out. Peter Seixas defines historical significance as “the valuing criterion through which the historian assesses which pieces of the entire possible corpus of the past can fit together into a meaningful and coherent story that is worthwhile” (Seixas 1994, 281). Historians generally regard something as significant if (a) it affects change or continuity with meaningful consequences, for many people, over a long period of time or if (b) it is revealing, leading us to understand other subjects in history and contemporary life in new ways, or was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups.

Competencies

Basing our judgment on a review of the history and literature on history learning outcomes, we recommend the following competencies as most essential for specifying what undergraduate history students should be able to do at the completion of a course of study.

Evaluate Historical Accounts

Students must recognize historical explanations in their most common forms: narrative, exposition, causal model, and analogy.

They should be able to identify an author's interpretation and critically scrutinize the evidence and analysis used to support it. In addition, they should be able to critically evaluate, compare, and synthesize historical accounts.

Interpret Primary Sources

Students must be able to analyze and interpret information drawn from primary sources, drawing on specialized subject knowledge and concepts of historical thinking. More specifically, they should be able to distinguish primary from secondary sources; assess the credibility of sources and make judgments about their usefulness and limitations as evidence about the past; consider how the historical context in which information was originally created, accessed, and distributed affects its message; and address questions of genre, content, audience, perspective, and purpose to generate subtexts that illuminate the intentions of the author.

Apply Chronological Reasoning

Students must take account of the role of time, sequencing, and periodization in historical narratives. In particular, students should demonstrate sensitivity to complex causation, with an ability to distinguish between proximate and ultimate causes; with a discerning eye for continuity and change over time; and with the ability to formulate and evaluate historical periods and turning points as heuristic devices for making sense of the past, recognizing the artificiality of periods and turning points and the ways they favor one narrative, theme, region, or group over others.

Contextualize

Students must demonstrate the ability to place an event, actor, or primary source within the context of its time in order to interpret its meaning and significance. Rather than assume timeless, psychologized notions of why people behaved as they did in the past

or that people of the past were similar or identical to ourselves, with the same beliefs, attitudes, instincts, and motivations, students must be able to appreciate the particular policies, institutions, worldviews, and circumstances that shaped people's practices in a given moment in time. Recognizing difference is by itself not enough, however, if the past is dismissed for being unenlightened or immoral. Students must also be able to reconstruct the plausibility of other people's perspectives and actions within their own frame of reference. Contextualization does not mean identification (we can understand another's viewpoint without accepting it as our own), facile claims to knowing (we can never directly know others' experiences and perceptions), or an emotional response (the goal is understanding, not necessarily admiration or sympathy). Rather, students should be able to make sense of actions, social practices, and institutions in terms of people's reasons for doing or believing what they did.

Construct Acceptable Historical Accounts

Students must be able to construct acceptable historical accounts that interpret the past using sources as evidence for knowledge claims in ways that demonstrate understanding of historical concepts, especially the nature of historical evidence, interpretation, and perspective. More specifically, students should be able to do the following: pose historical questions; select and utilize relevant and reliable primary source evidence to support their historical interpretation; extract information and supportable inferences from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, acknowledging, conceding, or refuting evidence that runs counter to the overall argument; recognize the limitations of evidence; and persevere through uncertainty, renouncing simple certitude (proof and inevitability) and easy relativism (every view is equal) for the disciplinary standard of limited relativism (plausible–implausible, acceptable–unacceptable).

Reflections on the List of Essential Concepts and Competencies

A definitive list of learning outcomes for history is, of course, a chimera. We offer this list of essential concepts and competencies as our best summation of what history students in college should know, do, and value based on our study of a century and more of historians thinking out loud about history education and more recent attempts by historians, philosophers, history educators, and cognitive scientists to define the nature of expertise in history. Before we turn to the problem of how to design assessment tools that are worthy of historical understanding, we pause to consider two important questions raised by our list.

In college, what is the study of history for?

When thinking about learning outcomes for history education, questions about the purpose of a BA in history—or even the value of taking a single history course in college—cannot be avoided.

In today's career-minded environment, students are drawn to preprofessional programs because it is obvious what such majors train students to do. The premedical (premed) major prepares students for graduate education in health-related professions. The education major is for future teachers. The business major is for those who want to work in business fields. History programs suffer by comparison because a bachelor of arts in history is not a ticket to employment as a historian, and the demand for history MAs and PhDs is small. So why study history in college?

The answer, we believe, is that a course of study in history does two important things very well. In good history programs, the study of history effectively marries the analytic and synthesizing strengths associated with the liberal arts and sciences—America's premier educational tradition—with the problem-solving and practical strengths necessary to help companies and organizations succeed and grow. Better perhaps than most other disciplines or at least as well as any, history is positioned to help

people become civic and workplace leaders who think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems. The reasons that this is so are apparent in our list of essential concepts and competencies.

In a paper published by the National History Center in 2008, “The Role of the History Major in Liberal Education,” Stanley Katz and James Grossman noted the close linkages between historical study and the broad aims of liberal learning. Katz and Grossman warn historians not to regard undergraduates as miniature graduate students, teaching history as the professors themselves were taught on the way to the PhD. Rather, they argue, undergraduate programs should be designed to “nurture [students’] liberal and civic capacities, in part by integrating disciplinary knowledge, methods, and principles into the broad experience of undergraduate education” (Katz and Grossman 2008). We concur wholeheartedly, and we call attention to the significant overlap between our list of essential history concepts and competencies and efforts by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to invigorate liberal education for the 21st century through the decade-old LEAP initiative (Liberal Education and America’s Promise). To prepare students for responsible citizenship and a global economy, LEAP’s Essential Learning Outcomes for a liberal education are as follows: (a) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; (b) intellectual and practical skills (e.g., inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, and quantitative and information literacy); (c) teamwork and problem solving; (d) personal and social responsibility (e.g., civic knowledge and engagement—local and global, and intercultural competence); and (e) integrative and applied learning (e.g., synthesis across general and specialized studies demonstrated through complex problem solving). When we compare the LEAP outcomes with our list of essential concepts and competencies for history, we find that a course of study in history closely aligns

with the AAC&U's outline for liberal learning in the 21st century (AAC&U 2015).

But students may find another purpose for history education even more valuable, at least at first. Surveys of employers' priorities for the kinds of learning students need to succeed in today's competitive and global economy show that history is well positioned to provide what business and nonprofit leaders want. A 2013 AAC&U study conducted by Hart Research Associates found that 93 percent of employers believe "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems" is more important than a student's particular major. When employers were asked to endorse educational practices that would be helpful in preparing college students for workplace success, the practices they selected amount to a précis of the essential competencies we describe, including (a) conduct research and use evidence-based analysis; (b) gain in-depth knowledge and analytic, problem solving, and communication skills; and (c) apply learning in real-world settings (Hart Research Associates 2013). On the basis of surveys like this, we believe that history programs can capitalize by design on students' desire to prepare for career opportunities and success.

Why study history? An 1898 AHA pamphlet stated that "the chief purpose [of historical education] is not to fill the boy's head with a mass of material which he may perchance put forth again when a college examiner demands its production" (Sipress and Voelker 2011, 1051). By contrast, our list of concepts and competencies for a history BA foregrounds a very different purpose for undergraduate history education. The history BA prepares future civic and workforce leaders to grapple productively with ill-defined problems by bringing inquiry, analysis, and communication and application of knowledge to bear on specific complex questions. Historical study trains people to be citizens committed to liberal learning and innovative problem solvers in real-world settings.

How do the essential concepts and competencies relate to introductory history courses?

Unlike disciplines that offer one or two clearly delineated courses introducing students to the major, history has many pathways to the major and relatively little sequencing within it. Furthermore, introductory courses are taught in different ways and for different purposes. In some departments, introductory courses are small courses organized around doing history, aiming to introduce students to historical thinking and methodology through a focused topic. In many others—probably most—introductory courses remain broad surveys of historical knowledge and are commonly large lecture courses that also serve general education goals for the university. As our earlier summary of the history of learning outcomes suggests, in many of these courses the goal of cultural literacy and the methods of coverage are still embraced. Although some professors aim to infuse historical thinking into these surveys, many others emphasize broad exposure to content knowledge as the primary aim.

We believe that introductory courses can and should introduce students to the disciplinary concepts and competencies we propose and that this can exist alongside knowledge transmission goals. We believe this on the basis of the learning science that rejects the attic theory of cognition, which considers a stockpile of knowledge accumulated over years of study to be the prerequisite for advanced analytic work. We now know that students learn more when they are engaged early, often, and cumulatively in problem-centered inquiries requiring disciplined ways of thinking. Introductory courses, whether small seminars or large lectures, should aim to introduce and develop some or all of the essential concepts and competencies outlined here. However, we acknowledge that there might be considerable disagreement within the profession on this point, and some, perhaps many, historians view the traditional survey as serving legitimate, valuable, and important ends, including establishing a foundation of knowledge for later study or promoting

cultural and civic literacy. Many departments face real constraints that make doing history in small seminars seem unfeasible; reimagining the large introductory course to emphasize historical thinking, including its goals, methods, and assessments, is a project still in development.

Consequently, at this moment, even though we are confident that the learning outcomes we have defined are universally applicable to the BA in history, we do not believe the assessment imagined in this white paper will be considered appropriate by all instructors to measure student learning in introductory courses. Those still wedded to coverage methods as the best way to attain cultural literacy likely will object to our recommended assessment tools. On the other hand, those looking to build introductory courses on the platform of historical thinking for liberal learning and expanded opportunities in the workplace likely will be intrigued.

Student Learning in History: Past, Present, and Future Assessments

Assessment is integral to history teaching and learning. History faculty members routinely assess student learning in individual courses, most often through papers and in-class examinations. Examinations in history often include multiple-choice questions, short answers (e.g., identifications), or essays that ask students to demonstrate knowledge or skills valued by the instructor. Essay assignments may ask students to analyze and synthesize a historical theme or historical narratives, interpret one or more primary sources, or conduct historical research by asking a historical question and answering it with primary and secondary sources. History faculty also employ a range of other assignments to assess student learning in courses: constructing primary source readers; oral presentations; short written assignments to assess particular skills like distinguishing between primary and secondary sources; questions for class discussion; and historical role-playing games like Reacting