

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES (HP)

September 1, 2015

I. Short Description

Historical Perspectives explores the development and change of human belief, action, and culture over time. Inquiry into the particularities and complexities of the past will be cultivated through the analysis of primary sources and artifacts alongside engagement with historical reasoning, theory, methods, and secondary sources. Students will grow in historical knowledge, practice historical reasoning, and develop an awareness of their own historical context as they practice historical reflection through researching and evaluating historical evidence and formulating compelling written arguments.

II. Thematic Core Learning Outcomes and Interpretation

A. Students will be able to....

1. critically analyze primary and secondary historical sources
2. interpret the past using sound historical reasoning
3. articulate the multiple connections between historical investigation and Christian conviction and practice

B. Expansion and interpretation of the outcome statements

1. Learning Outcome #1: Critically analyze primary and secondary historical sources.

Students should become adept at reading and evaluating a range of primary and secondary sources. They will learn to practice deep reading while balancing sympathy with skepticism, open to learning from the sources they encounter while asking critical questions about their reliability and utility. Instructors will teach students to assess the reliability of primary sources by taking into consideration, among other factors, context, motive, authorship, audience, internal consistency, external corroboration, and representativeness. In like manner, instructors will equip students to read secondary sources critically, paying attention to context, argument, use of evidence, motive, and potential bias.

Because different kinds of primary sources require different analytical approaches and sensitivities, instructors should strive to introduce students to a variety of primary sources, e.g., *written documents* such as newspapers, correspondence, legal records, sermons, memoirs, or political tracts; *visual artifacts* such as paintings, statuary, and cartoons; and *material objects* such as architecture and archaeological remains. This list is intended to be suggestive only. The range of accessible and relevant primary sources will vary by the subject matter of the course. It is best not to impose on instructors either mandatory types of sources or a minimum number of kinds of sources.

2. Learning Outcome #2: Interpret the past using sound historical reasoning.

History is not the past itself but rather the remembered past, the result of subsequent efforts to reconstruct and make sense of what actually happened. One of the goals of Historical Perspectives courses is to train students' minds in ways of thinking about the past that facilitate explanation and enhance understanding, teaching them to bring to bear the best practices of historical reasoning when interpreting historical phenomena.

Historians often speak of the “five C’s of historical thinking,” habits of mind that are foundational to their approach to the past. Although it is not necessary to give equal attention to each of these concepts, instructors should strive to teach students to recognize and appropriately apply sensitivity to each of the following:

Continuity and change over time. If there is a single truth that inspires serious historical investigation, it is the conviction that we gain great insight into the human condition by situating the lives of men and women in the larger flow of human experience over time. Students who study the past learn, for example, that we use different technologies than our forebears, abide by many different laws, and adhere to a range of different values and beliefs. At the same time they will become more aware of important areas of continuity with past, an important discovery in its own right.

Context. Students trained to think historically understand that historical context is crucial to historical understanding. When wrenched from its historical context, an isolated historical fact may intrigue or entertain us, but it has nothing meaningful to teach us. Context both “sets the stage” for critical historical events and provides an essential framework for interpreting their significance.

Causality. Learning to think critically about causality is essential to students’ ability to construct persuasive explanatory arguments about historical events. Students need to appreciate how difficult it is to prove causation of major historical events. They should also understand why the partial evidence that survives so often allows for multiple explanations of the same event.

Contingency. When it comes to studying the past, hindsight is a liability as well as an advantage. All too easily, we can come to see past developments as practically inevitable, in the process losing the sense of human agency and viable options that the subjects of our study sensed at the time. Students who are trained to think historically understand that historical outcomes depend on a number of prior conditions or factors that were, themselves, dependent on any number of prior conditions or outcomes, etc. In learning to appreciate this kind of historical contingency, students will enter the process of coming to grips with the unlimited interrelatedness of human experience.

Complexity. Finally, students who are trained to think historically appreciate that the investigation of the past involves far more than the rote mastery of a list of names and dates. Historical investigation, at its best, strives to use partial evidence to craft tentative explanations of a messy historical reality.

3. Learning Outcome #3: Articulate the multiple connections between historical investigation and Christian conviction and practice.

Students should understand that Christianity’s affirmation of the material world, as exemplified in the doctrines of creation and incarnation, secures the legitimacy of studying the human story. At the same time, they should appreciate that the mysteries of divine providence challenge the impulse to draw connections between historical events and God’s will.

Instructors should give explicit attention to how Christian practices relate to sound historical reasoning and reflection. Students should be able to explain the relevance and model the application of Christian practices in their own historical inquiry. These practices might include

hospitality, as we seek conversation with figures from the past; *patience*, as we invite figures from the past to speak first while we listen; *humility*, as we acknowledge the brevity of our own lives and our need for the breadth of perspective that history affords; and *charity*, as we remind ourselves that the apparent contradictions we perceive in others may have more to do with our own blind spots than with those of our subjects, and as we consciously ask ourselves what the golden rule requires of us in our encounter with “neighbors” long since passed.

III. Guidelines

A. Expanded Description

Historical Perspectives trains students to understand and analyze historical actors, events, contexts, and beliefs, cultivating appreciation for the study of the past and consciousness of one's rootedness in contingent historical contexts. Students will not only acquire the skills of historical inquiry but also display the value of Christian intellectual practices and convictions for historical investigation.

B. Connection between area outcomes (Part II above) and the 12 overall program goals of Christ at the Core (see p. 8-9 of the Proposal)

Given its central emphasis on equipping students with the skills of historical analysis, courses in the Historical Perspectives category will advance the following program outcomes specifically:

1. Student learning outcome #1 promotes “Christ at the Core,” Holistic Learning Goal #1: “developing strong abilities to discover and evaluate information they need to draw conclusions, practicing analytical and scientific reasoning, presenting their thoughts clearly in oral and written forms, and developing skills in aesthetic engagement.”
2. Student learning outcome #2 connects with “Christ at the Core,” Holistic Learning Goal #1 (see above) and “Christ at the Core” Holistic Learning Goal #3: “understanding the contours of theological, cultural, and intellectual traditions.”
3. Student learning outcome #3 supports “Christ at the Core,” Wisdom Goal #3: “growing in intellectual virtue and critical self-awareness through engagement with the complex questions of history, human values, and contemporary life.”

C. Examples for Assessment

A range of rigorous assignments could provide evidence that students have successfully achieved the three Student Outcomes given in section II.A. Depending on the structure of the course, one significant assignment might be relevant for assessing more than one outcome; in other cases a series of assignments will be more appropriate. A few examples and suggested approaches are offered here as *possible inspiration* of disciplinary appropriate and rigorous options, but **use of these exact assignments is not required**. Faculty are encouraged to go beyond these or substitute other creative assignments as they develop individual courses.

1. Assessment of Outcome #1: Students explain in written or oral presentation the difference between primary and secondary sources and then articulate and evaluate the different perspectives (such as author, audience, purpose, context, and historical significance) of specific primary and

secondary works relevant to the course topic.

2. Assessment of Outcome #2: Students practice historical reasoning by interpreting primary sources, engaging with secondary sources and providing independent historical analysis in support of a thesis through convincing argument. This could be presented in written or oral presentation.

3. Assessment of Outcome #3: Students explain in written or oral presentation how Christian belief and practice relates to their understanding of historical method and the past, and how the Christian's encounter with the past shapes their understanding of their own historical context. Or, in written or oral presentation, students identify key ways that Christian convictions speak to the study of history.

D. General Advice

None given.