

History

The Department of History engages its students through a study of the past. We are committed to the idea that the most compelling stories are often the most revealing ones. In addition to teaching students the particular skills of historical inquiry, we provide them with tools that serve them beyond their majors and beyond the university.

The discipline of history poses challenging questions about the ways that human beings have made the worlds they live in. There are many approaches to history. Some historians study politics, whether that means political parties or the ways that people who never held public office nonetheless act to shape public life. Others study the lived experience of everyday Americans or the popular culture that reflects how people understand the world around them. Still others are especially interested in the kinds of stories about the past that we tell ourselves, for those stories reveal a great deal about our own society as well as that of a different time. Although it is not true that history repeats itself, it is true that, without knowledge of the past, we are unable to understand the present.

The Department of History at Washington University offers history majors and minors the opportunity to develop a coherent and challenging program of study. We also encourage all undergraduates to incorporate the discipline of historical thinking into their liberal arts education. In all courses, students are taught the kinds of skills that will help them succeed both in classes at Washington University and in their postgraduate careers. History students learn to read carefully, think critically, research honestly, and present information and ideas clearly and concisely, both verbally and in writing.

The Department of History offers a wide variety of courses, ranging from the ancient world to the present and spanning across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. There are many opportunities for small-group learning and discussion in first-year seminars, sophomore honors colloquia, writing-intensive seminars, and advanced seminars. The history major is structured to be flexible and to encourage students both to pursue established interests and to explore topics, time periods, and locales that may be less familiar.

The Department of History prides itself on the individual attention that faculty mentors provide to students. Graduates express great satisfaction with their experiences in the major, specifically mentioning the faculty's knowledge of the subject matter, dynamic teaching styles, and respect for students.

Some history majors go on to pursue graduate work in the field and become professional historians, but most find that the knowledge and skills they build through history courses prepare them for a wide range of careers. Our graduates have attended law and medical schools and have pursued careers in government, education, research, business, communications, international agencies, publishing, museums and archives, public advocacy, and many other fields.

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