Guide to the B.A./M.A. Program (2009)

The B.A./M.A. program in history is designed for select history majors at American University who want to earn masters’ degrees. (It is not for majors in other disciplines at AU or for history majors from other universities.) It allows successful applicants to avoid taking the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), to move smoothly from undergraduate to graduate study immediately after the senior year without needing to apply again to graduate programs for admission, and to finish the M.A. degree faster than usual. But it will not shorten M.A. work radically or change its quality significantly. Here are the basic features.

Application and Admission

Interested students should apply for admission to the program in their junior year, before registering for fall semester senior year courses, via the normal graduate admissions process, indicating on the application that they are applying for admission to the combined BA/MA program. Students in this program are not required to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and need not submit a transcript. Three letters of recommendation from faculty are required, along with a written statement of purpose and historical interests. Minimum grade requirements are an overall grade point average of 3.25 and a GPA of 3.5 in history courses.

The department will notify applicants before they enter their senior year whether they are admitted to the program. Admission is at the discretion of the Graduate Committee and the Chair of the Department, and is awarded conditionally and conferred formally upon fulfillment of all requirements for the B.A. in History by the end of the senior year with a minimum 3.25 GPA and 3.5 GPA in history courses and a grade of B+ or better in the Senior Thesis seminars. The Department’s goal is to take only those applicants it believes will be successful in a program that requires intensive written work on a compressed schedule.

Nature of the Program

Students admitted to the B.A./M.A. program will take two graduate-level courses (3 credit hours each) in the senior year that will count toward both their B.A. and their M.A. As a result of this double-counting, once they obtain the B.A., they need only complete 24 credit hours for the regular history M.A. or 30 hours for the M.A. in public history. Students may apply a maximum of 6 credit hours of approved graduate-level course work toward the requirements of both degrees. If the M.A. program they select involves more than 30 hours of coursework or requires courses that are scheduled infrequently, they may not be able to complete the M.A. degree as rapidly. Students must fulfill all other requirements for the M.A. program to earn the M.A. degree.

One full year of course work for a graduate student is 18 hours, so the B.A./M.A. student may be able to complete the M.A. program in less than two years of full-time
study following graduation. But it is virtually impossible to cut the time to one year, for reasons explained below.

The Senior Year

Virtually all seniors who major in history will be enrolled in the Senior Thesis seminars, which require intensive written work. Their two graduate courses will also be demanding. In most cases seniors should consider 500-level or 600-level graduate courses, rather than 700-level courses, which are more difficult. Seniors should also select their remaining undergraduate courses carefully so as not to overburden themselves.

The First M.A. Year

After receiving the B.A., students formally enter the M.A. program and take a schedule typical for M.A. students. They should plan to take the Department’s introductory graduate course, HIST-744, The Historian’s Craft, in the fall semester. They must receive a grade of B or better in this course to satisfy this departmental requirement.

The rest of their schedule will vary according to field, department scheduling, and selection of options within the M.A. For example, most M.A. students concentrate their work in one field (such as early American history), but it is possible to pursue a two-field M.A. or an individually defined field. Although most students do not write an M.A. thesis, there is a thesis option. If one chooses to write a thesis, that decision affects scheduling and the number of elective courses. It is not possible to cover all the combinations and permutations in this guide; students are encouraged to read the general Graduate Guide for all History Department graduate programs, available on the website.

All students should plan on taking three three-credit courses per semester as a full load. (They may have a lesser load if they are part-time.) Before they graduate, they must satisfy the following additional requirements:

A) Two history colloquia or approved substitutes (six hours) with grades of B (3.0) or better. Unless they successfully petition for an exception, all students in Modern European History must take HIST-720 19th-Century Colloquium in Modern European History, and HIST-721 20th-Century Colloquium in Modern European History. Students in modern European history will, because of scheduling, not be able to take both colloquia within one academic year. Students in U.S. history normally take HIST-727 Colloquium in United States History I, to 1865, and HIST-728 Colloquium in United States History II, since 1865. These normally can be taken within one academic year. The student needs a grade of B or better to satisfy this requirement.

B) One research seminar or approved substitute (three hours) with a grade of B (3.0) or better: students electing to write a master's thesis will instead register for six hours of HIST-797 Master's Thesis Seminar;
C) At least one section of HIST-500 Studies in History, which are graduate seminars on topics which change from semester to semester, unless the student took such a seminar during his/her senior year. Again, the student needs a grade of B or better.

D) Three to six hours of elective courses at the graduate level. These courses will usually be combined undergraduate/graduate courses HIST-3xx/6xx, which provide lectures, reading, and discussions for undergraduates and graduate students, but give graduate students extra work and extra attention. The university stipulates that graduate students must not take 50% or more of their course work in such courses that combine undergraduate and graduate students (300/600 offerings).

Remaining Work

I. Competence with one tool of research

A tool of research is a skill, technique, or methodology valuable for conducting historical research. The History Department regards foreign languages, quantitative analysis, statistics, oral history, and new information technologies as acceptable tools of research for M.A. students. M.A. students in European history, however, must select a relevant language as a tool of research.

The M.A. tool of research examination should be taken before the student takes the M.A. comprehensive examination. The tool of research examination must be passed before the student receives his or her degree.

II. Satisfactory (or better) performance on a written comprehensive examination

This comprehensive exam is a four-hour test of the student's factual, interpretative, and bibliographical-historiographical knowledge in a standard or individually designed field. The standard fields are American History from the colonial period to 1865, United States History since 1865, and Modern European History 1789 to the present.

Comprehensive examinations are offered three times annually – in April, June, and January. Students who are taking a comprehensive examination are strongly encouraged to consult with the two designated exam readers, who are named approximately six weeks before an examination is administered. Students should also check with their advisers in order to discuss the best ways to prepare for the examination. For this examination students should plan to undertake the study of material that goes well beyond their course work. The topics and readings covered in the Colloquia offerings are especially significant in preparation for this examination. The Department conducts comprehensive examination workshops and provides advice on how to prepare...
for and write a satisfactory exam. Students are expected to take the initiative in preparing for these exams.

Note: A student who fails a comprehensive exam may take it a second time. A second failure is terminal.

B.A./M.A. students should allow for weeks, if not months, of preparation for the comprehensive exam. They draw up lists of what they have read and the recommended readings from Historian’s Craft and the colloquia, and consult professors about what they might have missed. Some form study groups; others try to shore up their knowledge in areas they have not covered in course work. All of this takes time. Passage of the comprehensive exam is almost always the last step of the M.A. program.

Students who have elected to write an M.A. thesis may, of course, turn it in after they have passed the comprehensive exam. The M.A. thesis, however, is not a substitute for the exam.

Again, this guide is designed to give you an overview of the basic features of the program. If you are interested, you should talk further with a faculty member in the area you are interested in studying. Once you are accepted into the program, you should plan out your own schedule and course work in close consultation with your adviser.