College of Letters Major

Admission to the Major

Students wishing to major in the College of Letters (COL) must submit an application in the spring semester of their first year, immediately after spring break. Sophomore transfer students may apply before or during orientation. Applicants must show that they will have the level of proficiency in a foreign language that is required by the study abroad program they plan to pursue. Application forms and information can be found on the COL website under “Apply to the Major” (wesleyan.edu/col/apply.html).

Major Requirements

The program consists of five components and leads to eleven course credits:

- Five colloquia designed to acquaint students with works of predominantly European literature, history, and philosophy (respectively)
  - The ancient world
  - The Middle Ages and Renaissance
  - The early modern period (16th–18th centuries)
  - The 19th century
  - The 20th–21st century

- Four electives. The minimum required is one in history, one in philosophy, one in literature/representation, and one in the major’s target foreign language-literature. These specialized seminars allow students to shape their COL major around a particular interest.

- Study abroad, in the spring semester of the sophomore year (or in certain situations, in the summer following sophomore year), usually in Europe, Israel, or in another country (if approved by the director of the COL) where the major’s selected foreign language is spoken.

- One comprehensive examination in April/May of the junior year, covering the texts read in the first three colloquia.

- One senior thesis or essay, whose topic can be chosen from a very wide range of disciplines. This work, along with the specialized seminars, allows COL students to further shape their major along their own interests.

In all these contexts, much emphasis is put on the development of skills in writing, speaking, and analytical argument. Students are encouraged to take intellectual risks, and for this reason letter grades are not given in courses taken for COL major credit; also, COL seminars generally require papers rather than final examinations. Instead of giving grades, tutors write detailed evaluations of their students’ work at the end of each semester, and these are kept on record (and discussed with each student upon request). Our general goal is cultivation of “the educated imagination.”

Student Learning Goals

The College of Letters (COL) is a three-year, interdisciplinary major for the study of European literature, history, and philosophy, from antiquity to the present. During these three years, students learn how to think and write critically about texts in relation to their contexts and influences—both European and non-European—and in relation to the disciplines that shape and are shaped by them.

Through a required sequence of five colloquia in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern period, the 19th and the 20th and 21st centuries, students learn about the emergence of the constitutive idea of Europe out of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome, and Europe’s changing identity and cultures over the ages. Over these three years, students also learn about the emergence and change of the disciplines as well as the forms of argumentation associated with each. Collaborative team-teaching in the first three colloquia fosters this pedagogical goal, ensuring that distinct disciplinary perspectives are both represented in conversation and in the classroom. Finally, majors become proficient in a foreign language through study abroad, where they also deepen their knowledge of another culture.

Assessment of these goals takes place continuously over the three years of the major. In lieu of grades, students receive lengthy written evaluations for each of their COL courses, which address both written work and class participation. Study abroad is required in the second semester of the sophomore year, and in order to be accepted for the program of their choosing, students must prove that they have acquired the necessary level of language proficiency. When abroad they take courses taught in the foreign language and when they return they must continue to maintain proficiency by taking at least one upper-level seminar in that language. Toward the end of their junior year, majors take comprehensive examinations that are planned, administered, and graded by two external examiners, representing different disciplines and with specializations in different time periods. The written portion of the comprehensive exam tests knowledge of the material covered in the first three colloquia and evaluates the students’ ability to analyze and draw from a variety of sources in order to develop and support coherent, integrative, and interdisciplinary arguments about them. The oral portion of the exam tests the students’ ability to orally defend and/or expand their arguments in a face-to-face conversation. In keeping with the COL’s preference for evaluations over grades, the examiners’ grading scale of Credit, Honors, and High Honors accompanies a detailed written evaluation of the student’s work on both parts of the exam. During the senior year, students must complete an honors project in their choice of disciplines and media. Senior theses (taking place over two semesters) are evaluated by two professors who are not the student’s advisor, in order to assure an objective assessment. One of the two evaluators is always a non-COL professor. Honors essays (over one semester) require one evaluating professor who is not the advisor.

By virtue of the Junior Comprehensive Examinations, the COL also undergoes its own yearly self-evaluation. The evaluations written for each student by the external examiners are also made available to the COL director, who looks to see if there is a trend in the overall strengths and weaknesses among the students. In addition, the examiners are asked to give their assessment of the entire COL program, first in a meeting with us and then in a letter that they may write together or individually. These assessments are shared with the department as a whole and any suggestions for changes to the program or the teaching are taken seriously. Indeed, it is because of these yearly assessments that we have made significant changes in our curriculum and, most notably, in the sequence of the colloquia.

Additional Information

Life in COL. The College of Letters attempts to integrate the social and intellectual lives of its members by inviting guest lecturers and by providing opportunities for students and faculty to meet such guests (and one another) informally. There are also regular informal social gatherings in the College of Letters library. The structure of the College of Letters and the smallness of its
classes bring about a close rapport between tutors and students and a lively and continuing dialogue among students of different classes.

After graduation. The academic standards of the College of Letters are reflected in the fact that its graduates have consistently entered the best graduate and professional schools, including schools of law, medicine, and business administration, as well as communications and the liberal arts. They also have won national fellowships and scholarships.