Criteria for Using Portfolios for Program Assessment
History Courses

Specific courses for which there is material in the portfolios:

1. Do the students demonstrate satisfactory progress on learning objectives (see Assessment Matrix)?

**A1** Students in A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective. Based on the written work in the portfolios, it would seem that this goal is accomplished most broadly in A306 which requires a comprehensive familiarity with medieval history. The written work for A394 and W194 emphasizes work on particular topics of interest to individual students.

Students in HIST A306, A394, and W194 all meet this objective. Obviously, the work from A306 demonstrates the full range of this objective most clearly.

Yes: exams include identification of specific people, places, and events that cover the broad range of medieval history, and papers also allow some focus on specifics, providing a good balance of breadth and depth. Students whose work is included here demonstrate satisfactory levels of mastery of this material.

**A2** Students in A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective.

Students in HIST A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective.

Yes: essays included in exams and papers allow students to contextualize the kind of knowledge demonstrated in their identifications in various ways, and the work sampled here shows success in this area.

**A3** Students in A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective. Although W194 as a course is less explicitly interested in issues of secular vs. religious authority, it is interesting to note how many of the exams and papers coming out of W194 reveal a sensitivity on the part of the students to the ways in which medieval women achieved power and authority through a consciousness, and manipulation, of the divide between sacred and secular.

Students in HIST A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective, although this may not always be obvious from the work that is in the portfolio (I just happen to have had the privilege of reading the work from all the other students in the class).

Yes: essays sampled include discussions of papal monarchy, lay piety, and other aspects of medieval culture that demonstrate the interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular.

**A4** Students in A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective. The materials from W194 reveal a particular emphasis on the
importance of evaluating not only current analyses of notable medieval women but also the medieval writings by and about those women.

Students in HIST A306, A394, and W194 all meet this objective.

This is not as easily demonstrated in the portfolios sampled, but experience with primary sources is implicit in student exam responses and clearly indicated in course syllabus. Papers also make some use of primary sources, though they are often quoted from secondary sources—a necessity much of the time, given the language issue.

E1 Students in A306, A394, and W194 meet this objective.

Yes: essays comprise a significant proportion of exams, and students write substantial papers. The sampled students do well in this area.

E2 It is impossible from the contents of the portfolios to determine the students’ ability to make in-class oral presentations.

The portfolio could not help document their in-class presentations. To this end, it might be useful to also include a computer disk with the students’ PowerPoint presentations (which accompanied their oral presentation) in their portfolio.

This is not demonstrated in the portfolios, because they can only contain written work.

2. What is the weakest aspect of the History courses based on student portfolios? How should this be addressed?

In general, the portfolios suggest that the students in medieval history courses are learning how to do work of some sophistication and sensitivity. The number of students who simply fail to submit reading logs, to complete the minimum required for an assignment, who do not have an understanding of when to paraphrase rather than quote, etc., is, nevertheless, somewhat disconcerting. These failures suggest that perhaps more time ought to be devoted in class to reinforcing critical thinking and writing skills developed (hopefully) in Common Curriculum courses. Otherwise, the portfolios indicate to me at least that the students are in fact acquiring the skills described in the syllabi.

It is difficult to evaluate a course based on the students’ performance. Clearly some students (perhaps Erin Landry or Kaila Guillotte in HIST W194) should spend more time on their homework; others (such as Charlotte Vaughn in HIST W194) need to spend more time at the WAC. It is not the responsibility of the professor, however, to force students to do their homework or to teach them the basics of writing. In general, students seem to be grasping the material that is presented to them in class. And certainly, the paper written by John Henry Trant for HIST A394, for example, would seem to demonstrate a keen sense of the medieval mindset. Certainly, the work in these portfolios suggests that students are meeting the objectives set for them in the syllabi.

As the course is now structured, it appears that students can get away with focusing on a limited
number of areas: they are allowed, for instance, to choose five of twelve identifications and two of five essays for the final exam in HIST-A306 (the core course). Especially for that core course, I wonder if it might not be useful to make students answer a broader range of questions, even though that would require less depth than currently demanded.

3. What is the strongest aspect of the History courses based on student portfolios? Why?
The written work from A306, A394, and W194 reveals a strong emphasis on the development of detailed research projects over the course of the semester. Students are required to familiarize themselves with a body of recent scholarly work in the course of pursuing research topics with not a trivial amount of depth and sophistication. Students are encouraged to engage in extensive library research using a variety of types of materials and research tools. Students learn, in short, how to be good historians through extensive written practice prepared for by shorter writing assignments, oral reports, reading logs, etc.

It seems clear from the work in the portfolios that the students are learning the ability to place important events / people / trends in context. Even in the written biographies, students make every effort to understand their women in the context of the Middle Ages. This is an essential skill for an historian, and one that, unfortunately, many students with BAs in history somehow manage to avoid acquiring.

The depth of their written work, evident in the scope of essays and papers, and to some degree even exam identifications. Students deal with a great deal of literature for class preparation, and much is required of them in terms of extra research for papers. Sara Butler is also generous with overall commentary: each paper and exam (save the final) is given a paragraph or two of reaction before the grade appears. This gives the student both a justification of the grade and some thoughts for further reflection.

4. Are additional learning objectives being met in the History courses?
All three of the courses under review require students to develop a familiarity with important research tools for doing medieval history, e.g., The Dictionary of the Middle Ages or the IMB. Although this is not specified as an expected learning outcome on our current matrix, it certainly could be. Dr. Butler requires all of her students to acquire research skills and familiarity with resources pertinent to the study of medieval history specifically.

Students demonstrate that they are capable of researching like an historian. It is not easy to write a research paper at Loyola University. Because medieval history has been such a low priority here for a long time, the library resources are quite poor. The fact that students were capable of producing good medieval work demonstrates that they forced themselves to learn how to use the medieval tools available here and at Tulane.

Aspects of literature, philosophy, theology and other cultural issues appear to be addressed, as I would expect, though I would not want the burden of assessing in these areas to be added to these courses. Nevertheless, students interested in literature are given ample scope to deal historically with literary figures, those interested in theology are able to focus their attention on such issues in their papers, and so forth. This seems to me an ideal way to begin to foster the kind of interdisciplinarity we hope to create in this program.

5. Additional comments or concerns? These appear to be interesting, demanding courses
which I’d enjoy taking if I could!