Brandeis University – History of Ideas Program
Learning Goals for the Minor

The History of Ideas Minor was developed to help students explore the sources of human beliefs and commitments by tracing their development over time. Its goal is to deepen understanding of both the significance of familiar ways of thinking and the strengths of unfamiliar ways. Our courses help students broaden their perspective on important issues by drawing attention to the diverse and ever-changing ways in which human beings have tried to make sense of their world and its problems.

The History of Ideas minor has students take two different kinds of courses: electives from departments outside their major and 2 interdisciplinary seminars that act as capstones for the program. The electives allow students to exercise independent judgment in putting together a set of courses that pursue common themes within very different interdisciplinary settings. The seminars, in contrast, allow them to pursue intensive study of important issues or intellectual periods in an environment that emphasizes the development of verbal and written communication skills. The minor is constructed as an interdisciplinary supplement to students’ majors, one that broadens the range of approaches that students encounter, while still demanding rigorous intellectual engagement with key texts and thinkers. In addition, the History of Ideas Minor contributes to the university’s social justice mission in two ways: 1) intellectually, by deepening our students’ understanding of the nature and sources of our claims about morality and justice; 2) practically, by increasing appreciation and respect for the diverse and ever-changing ways in which these claims have been made over time.

Completing the History of Ideas Minor helps students develop the following core skills:

- Critical thinking, based on close analysis of texts and comparison of different and changing expressions of ideas.
- Ability to analyze and write about complex ideas.
- Ability to read and analyze texts from diverse and unfamiliar traditions.
- Judgment about how to make the best use of different methodological approaches to the same issue.

Our courses in the minor vary, with students selecting their own electives from a wide range of departmental offerings and with capstone seminars changing each year. So the minor does not claim to impart to students a single body of knowledge. All of our courses aim, however, to help students appreciate:

- The development of ideas over time.
- The nature and extent of cultural diversity.
- The sources of familiar and canonical ways of thinking.
- The diverse and often contingent sources of long established beliefs and commitments.
The History of Ideas minor is especially attractive to students interested in graduate study in Philosophy, History, and other fields in Humanities and Social Sciences. As a result, many of our students go on to earn Ph.Ds and become academics. But it also helps prepare students well for any field, such as law, that requires careful analysis of the meaning and development of written texts.