European Cultural Studies: Learning Goals

The guiding premise of European Cultural Studies (ECS) is this: art and literature are not luxury commodities. Rather they are a crucial way of knowing and understanding the world. ECS explores European literature, art, music, architecture, dance, and philosophy beyond and across the boundaries of single nations, languages, and historical periods, always in concert with the historical, political, and social realities that underpin and illuminate any art form. This interdepartmental major offers a way of thinking about literature rather than any specific body of information. The overarching aim of the major is to discover how European cultures have ordered reality in the past and present, how they have made sense of the world morally and aesthetically, and how literature and the arts express, preserve, and embody these understandings. Because ECS embraces the whole of European culture, especially literature, and a great diversity of critical methods for understanding it, no one faculty member could possibly encompass the field of study. Consequently, the interdisciplinary, interdepartmental approach is a highly dynamic and collaborative endeavor that reflects the diverse interests of our students and faculty in the liberal arts. ECS brings together professors and undergraduates from a number of departments in the Humanities and the Social Sciences in a spirit of common inquiry.

The ECS major’s core course, ECS100a, introduces students to the wide range of interdisciplinary approaches possible in the study of liberal arts, and it serves as the point of embarkation for students’ individualized exploration of literature and the other arts from across Europe and from a wide variety of hermeneutic perspectives. The concept of interpretation is central: we all live by the act of interpretation, whether in ordinary daily life or in a seminar setting. ECS100a also focuses on developing the research skills, writing and speaking habits, and the basics of critical interpretation specific to the interdisciplinary study of literature and the arts. The ECS major also encourages the study of literature and culture in languages other than English. Courses are taught by distinguished faculty from across the university at Brandeis but especially in the humanities.

As an interdepartmental major, ECS is inherently critical, multicultural, and interdisciplinary. Its flexible curriculum is designed to serve the interests and needs of a changing student body and to encourage student collaboration at all levels of program planning.

The Major — Students completing the major in ECS will:

1. Achieve a deepened understanding of European civilization and its specific place in the global context;
2. Interpret aspects of literature and the other arts that can or must be studied cross-culturally, such as: form and genre; the movement of beliefs and ideas
across boundaries, including through translation; exile arts and literatures; and literary, artistic, and philosophical movements that span multiple cultures, such as Enlightenment, romanticism, modernism and the avant-garde;

3. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of a variety of disciplines;

4. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic enquiry;

5. Have the opportunity to work closely with faculty and fellow students in small seminars and the opportunity to be mentored on a senior thesis.

Core Skills: ECS majors from will develop the capacity to:

1. perform a strong and revealing close reading of any text (whether image, music, or literary)
2. understand the implications of different interpretive techniques, weighing the benefits against limitations of different methods and strategies;
3. effectively use library and online resources to identify, document, and exploit primary and secondary research materials;
4. construct a rhetorically persuasive argument about literary and artistic problems by identifying and articulating a compelling and productive question about literature and synthesizing relevant critical literature;
5. recognize the profound difference between knowledge and mere information, to distinguish between human, humane understanding and mere technique.
6. The ultimate aim of humane understanding is emancipation from all forms of falsehood, distortion, and illegitimate authority through the exercise of public, reasoned discourse.

Upon Graduating:
A Brandeis student with a ECS major will be prepared to use the knowledge and skills gained from the sustained study of literatures and cultures to pursue professional training and a range of careers that demand a global perspective or a knowledge of and appreciation for diverse cultures, including those in academics, law, government, non-governmental organizations and non-profits, and international business.