

I suspect that many of you have been asked to promote our profession recently. I, for one, have never been a “natural” at “selling” history. One of the reasons that I chose the historical profession is because the world of “hard knocks” and “hard sells” never appealed to me. That being said, I understand the neo-liberal world in which we live, which has collapsed the epistemological distinction between economy and society. The market is everywhere and our “industry” is under tremendous economic pressure. In Ontario, the Progressive Conservative government of Doug Ford recently announced that it will be cutting funding to the province’s universities and colleges. But perhaps that is the least of our worries. We have seen a decline in our enrolments since 2008. A decade ago we offered three first-year survey courses in Canadian history at Carleton University. Each class was capped at 180 students. We still offer three classes today, but now they are capped at 80. And, sometimes, our enrolment does not even reach the lowered limit.

Selling History

There are many good reasons to study history, but perhaps the most important to impress on those who show up to recruiting events is that interest leads to success. It is a lot easier to succeed at university when you are passionate about something.

But this is not just a Carleton problem. It is not even solely a Canadian problem. In the United States, history majors are also vanishing. According to the most recent federal data, the number of history degrees conferred in the US has fallen from 34,642 in 2008 to 24,266 in 2017. That is a thirty percent drop. To be sure, we have gone through this kind of hollowing out before. During the period from 1969 to 1985, history’s share of majors dropped by 66 percent, but that decline followed a period of rapid enrolment expansion. This time it is different.

So why are students avoiding majoring in history? According to Northeastern University’s Benjamin M. Schmidt, who has recently examined the matter, students are entering those programs that appear to have higher job prospects rather than following their academic interests. “Students and their parents seem to be thinking a lot more that they need to major in something practical, [something that is] likely to get them a job at the back end,” states Schmidt. The emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education, he adds, has also resulted in an increasing number of students moving away from the humanities in hopes of graduating with a degree that will secure them more financially-rewarding job.

Some American universities have attempted to change the public’s perception that a history degree has little “real world” value

by spotlighting the achievements of a number of “great” history grads. At the University of Miami, for example, the campus’s paths are lined with lawn signs featuring the images of former history majors who have gone on to “greater things.” Below the headshots of Conan O’Brien, Ivanka Trump, Martha Stewart, Brian Moynihan (the CEO of the Bank of America), Kenneth Chenault (the former CEO of American Express) and others reads the tagline, “History Major.” The promotional material captures the fact that history majors go on to a variety of rewarding careers and in many cases our graduates move up the ranks of their respective fields faster than their non-history major counterparts. In addition, according to data from the University of Texas, history majors appear to make more than many other majors – including English, psychology, sociology and even a number of biology-based majors, after adjusting for the university that they attended. Ultimately, Schmidt says, whether through majors or course enrolments, “the long-term state of the discipline will rest on how it adapts to a cohort of students --

and their parents – who are much less receptive to arguments for the liberal arts than previous generations have been.”

I don’t disagree with this, but I think it is also important to keep telling potential students and their parents that success in the world of academe is often based on interest. In 2005, the late Steve Jobs gave a commencement

address at Stanford University where he advised the graduating class to pursue their own passions. As a student at Read College, Jobs had dropped out after the first semester because he was uninspired by the courses that he was taking. But he stayed at Read College, sleeping on his friends’ floors, returning coke bottles for pocket change and, once a week, making the five-mile trek across town to the Hare Krishna church for a free meal. All the while he was dropping in on those classes that he found interesting. One of these classes was calligraphy. Many of his colleagues at the time were unimpressed. What can one possible do of value with a knowledge of calligraphy? But it was Jobs who had the last laugh because when the first Apple computer appeared ten years later, it was distinguished in part by its multiple typefaces and proportional spacing between the text. Jobs had no idea that this is how things would turn out. He was simply following his passion, believing that someday all of the dots would connect to produce a string of successes.

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Matt Bellamy,
English Language Secretary