

How to improve career prospects for our grads, including *beyond academia*?

A first-year student came to see me at the end of a class last semester. He ask me a question that many in our profession – professors, administrators, graduate and undergraduate students alike – are asking themselves today: How hard is it to get a job in history after graduating with a degree in, well, History?

The question gave me pause, to say the least. The study of history is in many ways its own reward, and the teaching of history is fundamental to the fostering of an informed citizenry, the encouragement of critical engagement with society, and for speaking truth to power. But I didn't want to settle for that kind answer. "Seek ye first the intellectual kingdom, and all else will follow," may be a noble ideal, but for most people, intellectual stimulation alone is not going to pay the bills – nor will it necessarily convince the Bank of Mom & Dad to help finance one's preferred path for post-secondary education.

Still, it is incredibly valuable to work in a field that relates to one's interests. The student explained that he was majoring in engineering... and that he absolutely hated it. His true passion was history. According to the student, his parents had pushed him to study engineering because they were convinced that the job prospects were much greater than they could ever be in history.

One wonders how far the perceptions of parents, in particular, have been serving to drive down the number of new history students in recent years. Statistics buried deep within the Government of Ontario website suggest that the student's parents may have had a point, but that things may not be quite as hopeless as they have been led to believe. According to the most recent Ontario University Graduate Survey, some 46% of 2012 Humanities grads in the province had managed to find full-time work by 2014-2015 that was "somewhat related" or "closely related" to the skills they had developed at university. Among Engineering grads, the figure was a much stronger 71%.¹ (Both of these figures may be overly optimistic, however, as a majority of graduates from both fields did not complete the survey.) A few more interesting stats: out of those Humanities grads who were working, only 2% were food and beverage servers. So much for the barista-historian trope! Academic jobs, however, are even more elusive – a miniscule 0.2% had found work as university professors or lecturers.

In responding to my student, I wanted to be frank and honest without being unduly negative or discouraging. My answer can be paraphrased as such: "It's not easy to land a job that relates directly to history, or in which history is used on a daily (or even weekly) basis, but there are jobs out there in which you can expect to apply the skillset that you will have developed over the course of your history degree, and in which your ability to do your work may benefit from your knowledge of the past." I asked the stu-

¹ <http://www.iaccess.gov.on.ca/OsappRatesWeb/enterapp/home.xhtml>

dent to tell me more about himself and his interests in history. I learned that he was trilingual – English, French and Spanish – and interested in colonial New France and New Spain. What about working in foreign affairs, I asked? With his language skills and a knowledge of the broader historical contexts that today inform the contemporary issues in nearly every country on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, he would be a great asset to Canadian-based businesses, organizations or government departments with dealings abroad in the Americas. The student's eyes widened with the sudden realization that the study of history might not, after all, be as 'pointless' as he had been led to believe.

Herein lies the problem: the historian's skillset can be applied in a variety of ways in the modern economy, but many parents, prospective students, potential employers, and even professors don't realize it. This lack of awareness has doubtless contributed to challenges in enrolment, and it may also be contributing to history graduates' difficulties in securing work that relates to their skillset. If students aren't informed by their professors about the different types of skills that they have developed, and about how those skills relate to different types of employment, then they might not think to seek out those jobs – they won't necessarily know how to sell themselves to prospective employers. If employers aren't aware that history students have the skills they're looking for, then they won't seek to hire those students.

Allow me to provide an example. In my view, policy analysis is one of the types of work that history graduates are well suited to, in light of the evidence-driven research, writing, information synthesis, and critical analysis skills that are emphasized in our field, and in light of their sensitivity to the crucial historical contexts that inform and sometimes drive the policy issues of today. And yet, a recent Government of Canada post-secondary recruitment campaign for new policy officers did not include "History" among the nearly 50 different areas of educational specialization applicable to the competition.²

² The related areas of specialization were: Administrative Law, Human Rights, Labour Law, Law, Statistics, Women's Studies, International Law, Business Administration, Auditing, Commerce, Administration, Information Management, Finance, Public Finance, Financial Accounting, Industrial Relations, Management, Marketing, Office Administration, Project Management, Risk Analysis and Management, Taxation, Public Policy, International Business and Supply Chain Management, Communications, Arts, Education, International Relations, Social Policy, Sociology, Psychology, Economic and Finance Policy, Economics, Human Resources Management, Industrial Administration, International Business and Management, Labour and Industrial Relations, Management and Business Information Systems, Organizational Behavior and Development, Public Administration, Accounting, Mass communications, Media studies, Political Science, Social Sciences, Advertising, e-Business Supply Chain Management or International Studies. <http://jobs-emplois.gc.ca/psr-rp/index-eng.php?p=2>

How, then, can we help to improve the career prospects of our grads, specifically, beyond academia? For its part, the CHA is in the process of building a “Why a history degree” website where the profile of successful graduate students and their present employment will be posted. This, I think, is a great first step. I also have a few ideas, some of them a bit unorthodox, below...

For example, history departments should:

- Develop and implement a communications plan or promotional campaign to encourage greater awareness among students, parents, professors, the media and employers about the skills developed through a history degree and how these skills can be applied in the job market. *E.g.*:
 - › Editorials and outreach to local online and print media outlets.
 - › Direct engagement with local employers to identify skills that they are looking for in candidates, and to encourage them to include history and related skills among the key requirements in job competitions.
 - › Information for local high schools and parents of prospective history students about the value of a history degree, including the intellectual and professional advantages.
- Where appropriate, rename and/or redesign courses to better reflect the transferable or ‘soft’ skills that the course will develop (see Adam Chapnik’s “A Profoundly Immodest Proposal” in the *CHA Bulletin*, 41.3 (Fall 2015), p.25).
- Work more closely with university career development centres, and ensure that faculty and students attend career-oriented workshops that bring employers and alumni from different professional backgrounds together with students.
- Create a departmental “Careers Committee” to study career outcomes of recent alumni and to look at ways to connect students with potential employers.
- Explore ways for the undergraduate and graduate degrees to incorporate courses in other areas of specialization that are being called for by employers.

For their part, professors could:

- Provide students with an overview of the specific skills that they will develop in the course, and explain how they can convey that skillset to potential employers.
- Attend and encourage students to attend sessions organized by their university’s career development centre; or invite local professionals from outside academia with a history background to talk to their class about the skills related to their work and career planning.
- Where appropriate, give assignments that more closely reflect the types of projects that students might be expected to undertake in the professional world outside academia. In addition to developing skills and tangible experience that are more relatable to employers, these types of assignments will allow students to analyze the past in new and provocative ways. For example, students could:
 - › Develop a business case for a new historic site, complete with an explanation of the strategic context, analysis of

risks and opportunities, recommendations, and post-approval management of the site.

- › Write a business case for a historical undertaking that occurred in the past, from the perspective of an official who would have been alive at the time – such as a historical treaty, trade agreement, business arrangement, union, strike action, alliance or military engagement.
- › Write a follow-up report of a historical event or meeting between historical leaders, from the perspective of someone who was there.
- › Write a briefing note, complete with background information, strategic considerations and follow-up recommendations about a historical event or issue, for a historical figure or decision-maker who would have been alive at the time.
- › Produce a media analysis report, based on newspaper, radio or television reports at the time of a historical event, or of the introduction of a ‘new’ technology or product.
- › Develop an advertising campaign or communications strategy for a historical consumer product or technology, geared toward a historical audience.
- › Create a timetable for the completion of a series of tasks or events that are part of a broader historical initiative or development.
- › Write a speech or speaking notes for a historical actor.

Developing these types of assignments should not prove difficult. The Internet is rife with useful templates that can be used as a starting point (see, for example, the federal Treasury Board website³). Interdisciplinarity is all the rage these days, so why not collaborate with colleagues in business school, in communications, in political science, economics, *etc.*, to develop such assignments?

To many outside our profession, the connection between a degree and a job in, say, engineering, can seem far more obvious than the connections between a history degree and a history-related job. As professors of history who benefit materially and intellectually from the hundreds of students who attend and participate in our courses every year, it is incumbent upon us to make the link between a history degree and history-related jobs more obvious for students and employers alike.

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³ <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/hgw-cgf/oversight-surveillance/itpm-itgp/pm-gp/emf-cag/bct-mar-eng.asp>