

AMERICAN  
HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION

**CAREERS FOR**  
**HISTORY**  
**MAJORS**

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# Careers for History Majors

Edited by Julia Brookins and Sarah Fenton

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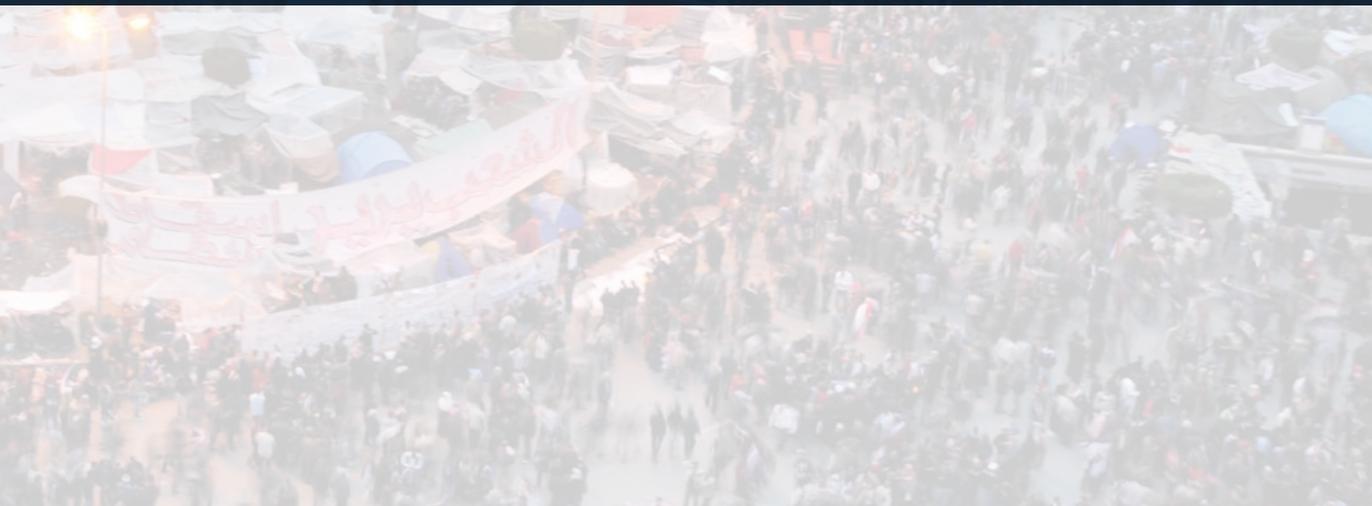
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“Understanding history provides context and tools that help people navigate the contemporary world. History is as much about today and tomorrow as it is about yesterday.”

**Lonnie Bunch**

*Founding Director*

Smithsonian National Museum of  
African American History and Culture



# INTRODUCTION

Sarah Fenton

Students of history learn to reach sound judgments by reading widely and weighing evidence with care. They construct persuasive arguments based on research rather than rumor or reflex.

If you are considering joining them, the evidence collected in this book will help you make an informed decision about whether to pursue a degree in history, or even simply to sign up for that first course—maybe a seminar on ancient Egypt or a course on the history of medicine, the Zhou dynasty, or the United States in the 21st century. Consider this little book your first assignment, though not a difficult one—there will be no exam when you’ve finished, and its contents needn’t be read in sequence.

But knowing how a book is organized can help you make use of it. If you’re a numbers person, turn to Section One, “What Can You Do with That History Degree? Exploring the Data.” Its employment figures include current occupations of former history majors as well as measurements of comparative earnings data and career satisfaction over time. Section Two, “History Discipline Core,” outlines the objectives of a history degree: the enduring knowledge and acquired skills specific to

this discipline. In Section Three, “Many Paths, One Degree,” six graduates approach the question “Why study history?” from different perspectives: from the needs of potential employers to the demands of a participatory democracy, from the challenges of globalism to the pursuit of intellectual and ethical enrichment. Scattered throughout are testimonials from history majors about what they learned and how that education has affected their lives.

Taken together, the evidence collected here provides a portrait of what programs in history achieve at 21st-century American colleges and universities. You’ll find that the reasons to study history are as varied as the people who study it. Should you wish to learn more—to ask questions or contribute thoughts about your own experience in a history course—please visit the American Historical Association’s “Why Study History?” web page at [historians.org/whystudyhistory](https://historians.org/whystudyhistory).



# INTRODUCTION

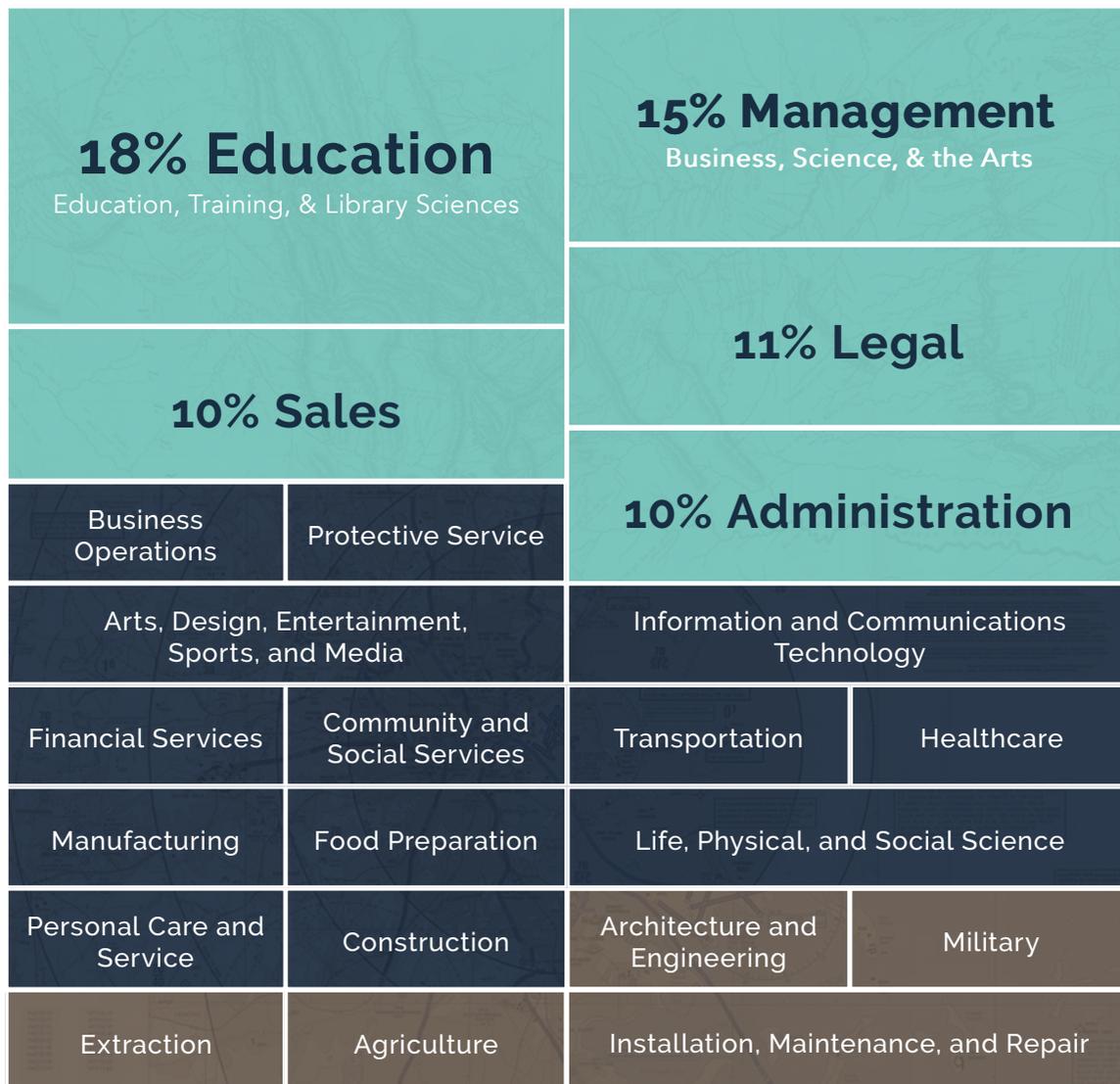
## What Can You Do with That History Degree? Exploring the Data

Paul B. Sturtevant

A history degree doesn't narrow your opportunities after college. Instead, the history major opens a world of possibilities for your future. Federal government data show the variety of exciting career paths that history majors follow.

# History majors pursue a variety of professions, and the majority rise to high positions in the careers they choose.

## Career Fields of History Majors:



■ Top 5 fields of work   ■ Fields with less than 5%   ■ Fields with less than 1%

For a more detailed analysis of this data, see [historians.org/history-is-not-a-useless-major](https://historians.org/history-is-not-a-useless-major)

College graduates with a degree in history earn median incomes of \$55,000. This is only marginally less than the \$60,000 earned by business majors, and more than the \$51,000 median for people with life sciences degrees.

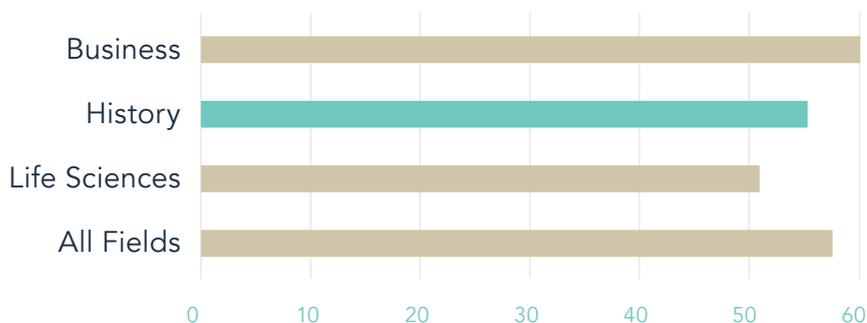
As you can see, career prospects for history majors are good. You get to decide where your path lies: your degree is a springboard to one of the many fields that value the skills you learned in college.

Median income is the middle data point for all respondents reporting full-time employment, ages 25–64.

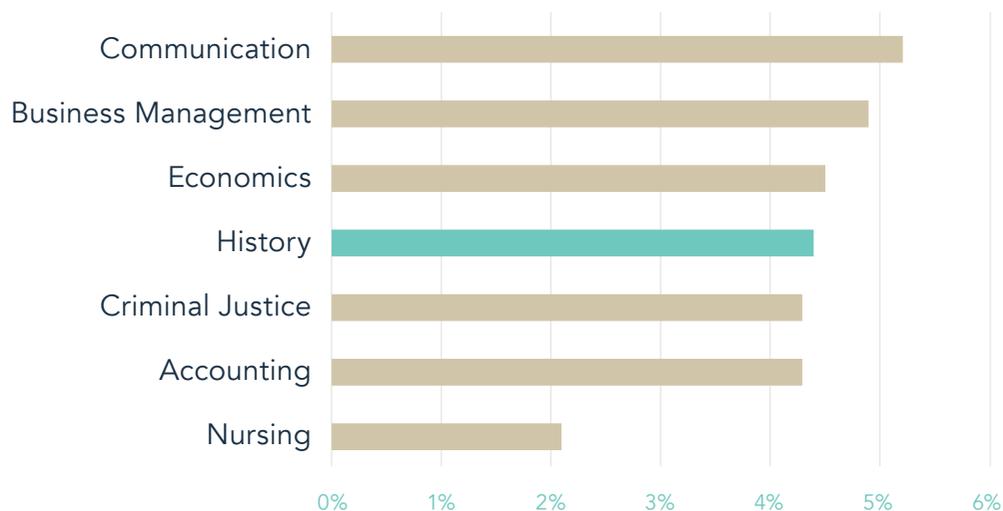
From 2010 to 2014, the vast majority of history majors had jobs, with less than 4.5% unemployed.

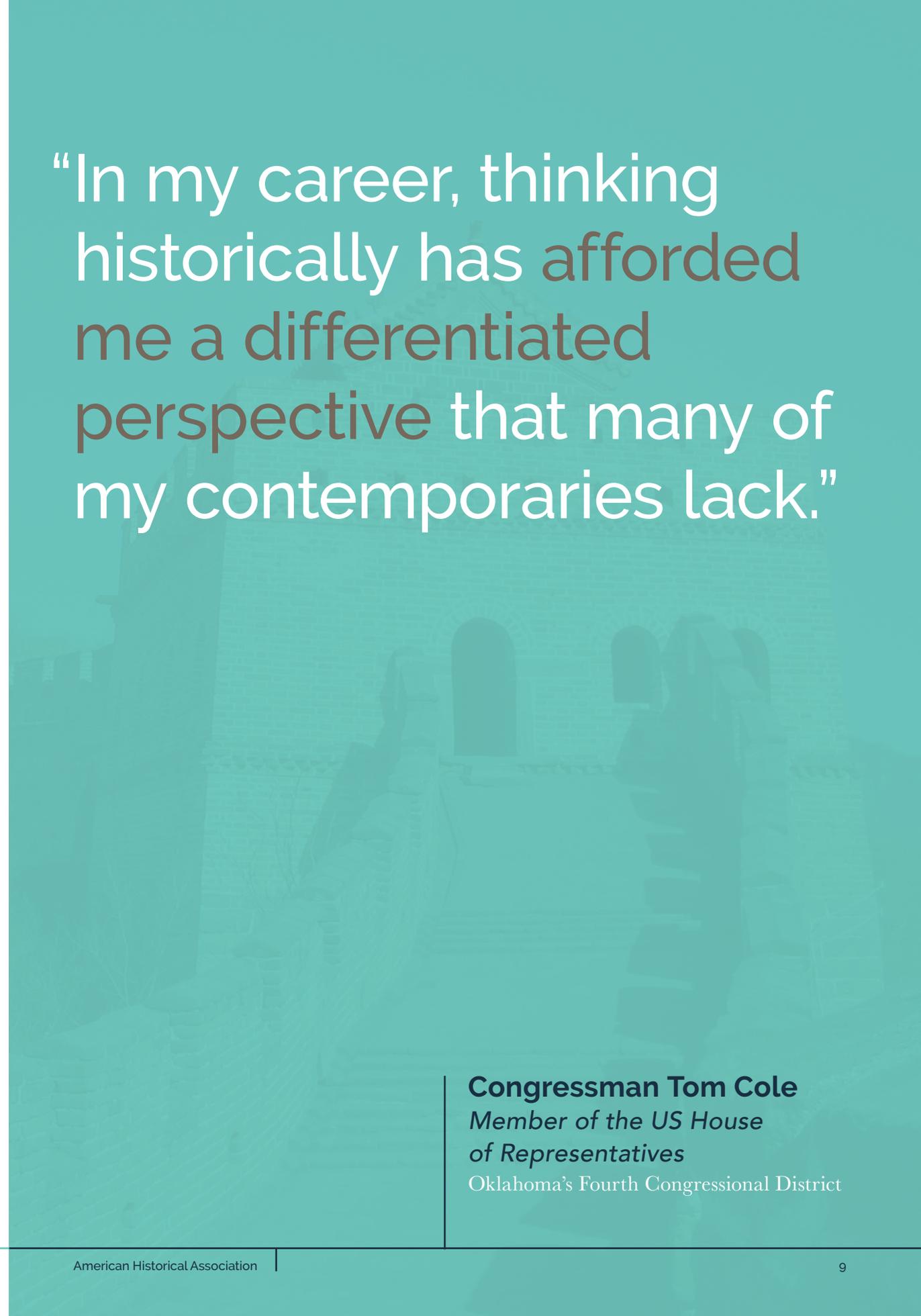
Data source for all charts: ACS 2010–14, 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample.

### Median Income (in Thousands of Dollars) by Bachelor's Degree Field



### Unemployment Rate by Undergraduate Major

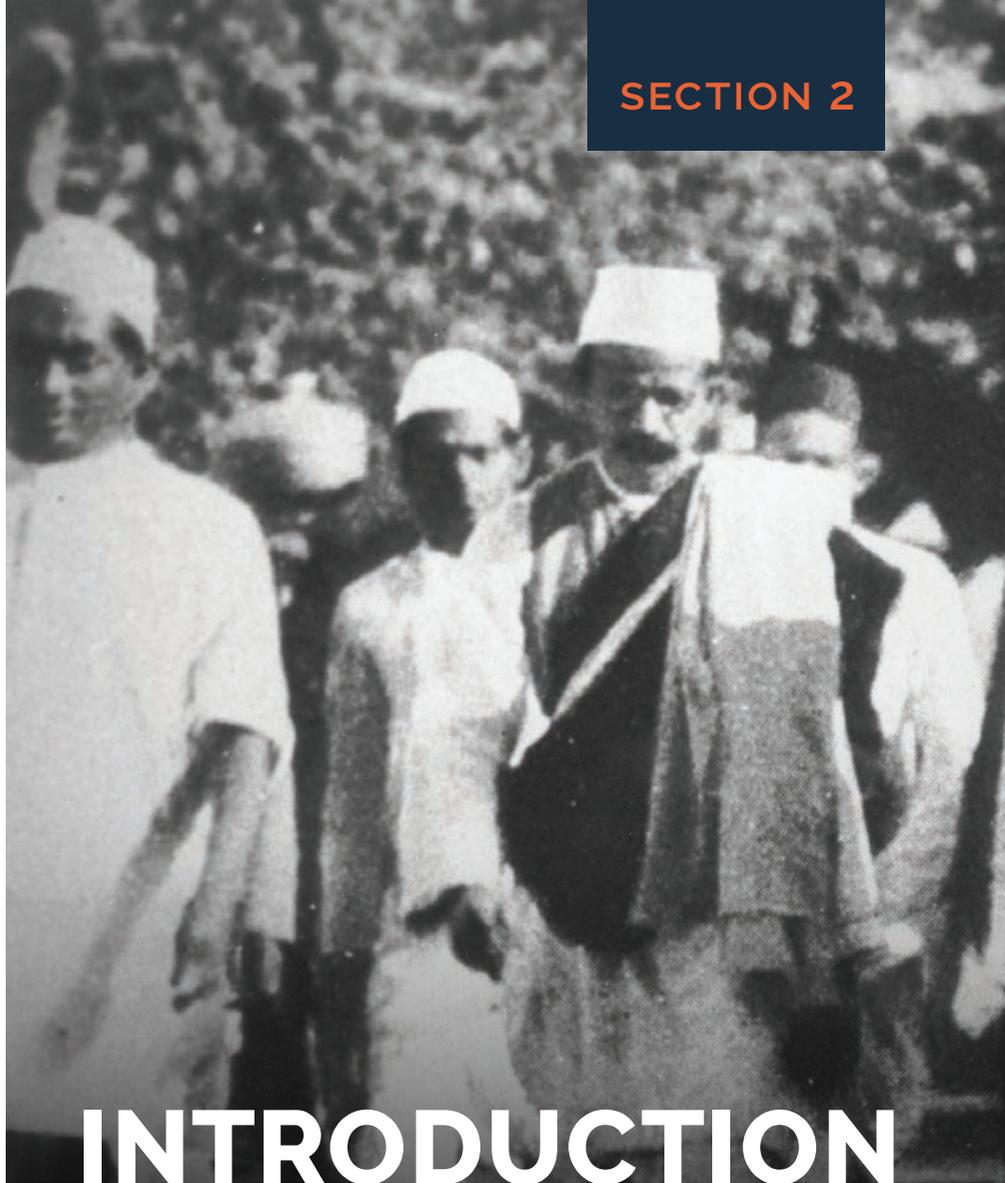




“In my career, thinking historically has afforded me a differentiated perspective that many of my contemporaries lack.”

**Congressman Tom Cole**  
*Member of the US House  
of Representatives*

Oklahoma's Fourth Congressional District



# INTRODUCTION

## History Discipline Core

Anne Hyde

The “History Discipline Core” framework that follows represents the AHA Tuning project’s summary of the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that students develop in history courses and degree programs.



It is a “living” document, revised to reflect how historians have used and changed it over the past three years. Because we believe that any discussion of teaching history must be faculty driven, instructors from more than 100 different institutions debated and drafted the information you’ll find on the following pages, which we regard as a reference point to stimulate further conversations within history departments and other relevant units of colleges and universities.

We hope to see the framework taken apart, added to, or winnowed down to reflect the distinct character of each institution and its students—

catalyzing a process in which history faculties lay out their own goals and outcomes for courses, majors, and degrees, and then “tune” such descriptions by asking their students, alumni, local employers, and civic leaders to join in a conversation about what history degrees provide.

Our aim is to establish an ongoing collaboration with a large set of stakeholders about the essential nature of history in higher education and the breadth of skills and knowledge that history students bring to the table.

# 2016 History Discipline Core

## Discipline Profile and Core Concepts

**History is the study of the human past as it is interpreted using artifacts, written evidence, and oral traditions.** It requires empathy for historical actors, respect for interpretative debate, and the trained use of an evolving set of practices and tools.

As an inquiry into human experience, **history demands that we consider the diversity of human experience** across time and place.

As a public pursuit, **history requires effective communication** to make the past accessible; it informs and preserves collective memory; it is essential to active citizenship.

As a discipline, history requires a deliberative stance towards the past; the sophisticated use of information, evidence, and argumentation; and the ability to identify and explain continuity and change over time. Its professional ethics and standards demand peer review, citation, and acceptance of the provisional nature of knowledge.



# Core Competencies and Learning Outcomes

## History students can:

### 1. Build historical knowledge.

- Gather and contextualize information in order to convey both the particularity of past lives and the scale of human experience.
- Recognize how humans in the past shaped their own unique historical moments and were shaped by those moments.
- Develop a body of historical knowledge with breadth of time and place—as well as depth of detail—in order to discern context.
- Distinguish the past from our very different present.

### 2. Develop historical methods.

- Recognize history as an interpretive discipline—an account of the human past created in the present from surviving evidence.
- Collect, sift, organize, question, synthesize, and interpret complex material.
- Practice ethical historical inquiry that makes use of and acknowledges sources from the past as well as the scholars who have interpreted that past.
- Develop empathy toward people in the context of their distinctive historical moments.

### 3. Recognize the provisional nature of knowledge, the disciplinary preference for complexity, and the comfort with ambiguity that history requires.

- Welcome contradictory perspectives and data, which enable us to provide more accurate accounts and construct stronger arguments.
- Pursue and describe past events from multiple perspectives.

- Make clear the compound causes of complex events and phenomena using conflicting sources.
- Identify, summarize, appraise, and synthesize other scholars' historical arguments.

### 4. Apply the range of skills it takes to decode the historical record, because of its incomplete, complex and contradictory nature.

- Carefully consider a variety of historical sources for credibility, position, perspective, and relevance.
- Evaluate historical arguments, explaining how they were constructed and might be improved.
- Revise analyses and narratives when new evidence requires it.

### 5. Create historical arguments and narratives.

- Generate substantive, open-ended questions about the past and develop research strategies to answer them.
- Craft well-supported historical narratives, arguments, and reports of research findings in a variety of media for a variety of audiences.

### 6. Use historical perspective as central to active citizenship.

- Apply historical knowledge and historical thinking to contemporary issues.
- Develop positions that reflect deliberation, cooperation, and diverse perspectives.

# Taking Charge of Your Education:

## The History Discipline Core during College

Sarah Olzawski

As a history major, you will develop and hone skills specific to the discipline during your years in college.

You already know that you will read a lot; you will also analyze, synthesize, and contextualize what you've read and thus become a writer with a special set of skills. Just as you deeply consider the sources you scour for your courses, you should also think about the habits of mind a history major develops. After college, you will need to make clear to interviewers the unique value you bring to their organizations. How you plan and think about your history education now can get you started on that path.

### Aim for Depth and Breadth

Take at least two history courses that seem closely related to one another and take at least two history courses that cover eras and areas of the world about which you know very little. With these parameters in mind, you will be able to choose courses that will put the human experience in context. You'll find connections where you didn't expect them and see differences where others do not.

### Embrace Quantitative Thinking

Take a statistics or a research methods course, even if it's not required for your major or degree. Being a history major means you have a keen ability to wade through complex material, make sense of it, and build a narrative about it. Adding quantitative skills to those talents will allow you to strengthen your arguments with precise and enumerative evidence. In the workplace, knowing how to manage data and numbers while communicating the story or issues behind them will make you a valuable employee.

### Practice History

Put down the books and step away from your papers. Seek out an experiential learning opportunity where you can practice history in your local community. Ask your adviser if any internships are available that could enhance your course of study. Look for experiences that may be lurking in other departments at your school. Investigate the collections and archives in local museums or libraries. Putting into practice what you've learned in your courses, in an environment where history is being lived and crafted, will help build real-world, transferable job skills.

Keeping these three goals in mind will make you a more well-rounded scholar with a vocabulary to describe how your history major prepared you to be a competitive candidate for a career in almost any field.

“Studying history prepared me to thrive in a fast-paced, often high-stakes policy environment. **Society's problems aren't solved in a vacuum.** Applying historical context to contemporary challenges is imperative. Study history and you're part of the solution.”

**Michelle Emick Ronholm**  
*Policy and Communications Consultant*  
Michelle Ronholm Communications

# Talking to Employers about Your Degree:

## The History Discipline Core on the Job Market

Loren Collins

In her book *You Majored in What?*, Katharine Brooks addresses a question heard frequently by history majors and graduates alike: “What are you going to do with that?”

As I neared graduation with my own BA in history, Anne Paulet, a professor and active member of the AHA, advised my cohort to be prepared to tell employers how our degree enabled us to “read, write, and communicate” with the best of the competition. Brooks, a career counselor, extends the argument, arguing that liberal arts degrees open an uncommon variety of doors that lead to boundless possibilities when we know how to talk about them fluently and demonstrate the skills they describe.

As job candidates, we cannot assume that potential employers understand the value our degrees represent. We must be able to

articulate that value in order to close the gap in their understanding. Fortunately, the American Historical Association’s Tuning project has traveled much of this distance for us. Every year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys a variety of industries to provide a ranked list of the top skills employers want from college graduates. When asking yourself how studying history has prepared you for the job market, start with the Discipline Core, and learn how it addresses the top 10 skills NACE has identified, listed below:

### Top 10 Skills Employers Seek in College Graduates

1. Communication
2. Teamwork
3. Making decisions and solving problems
4. Planning, organizing, and prioritizing
5. Obtaining and processing information
6. Analyzing quantitative data
7. Technical skills related to the job
8. Using computer software
9. Creating and editing written reports
10. Selling and influencing others



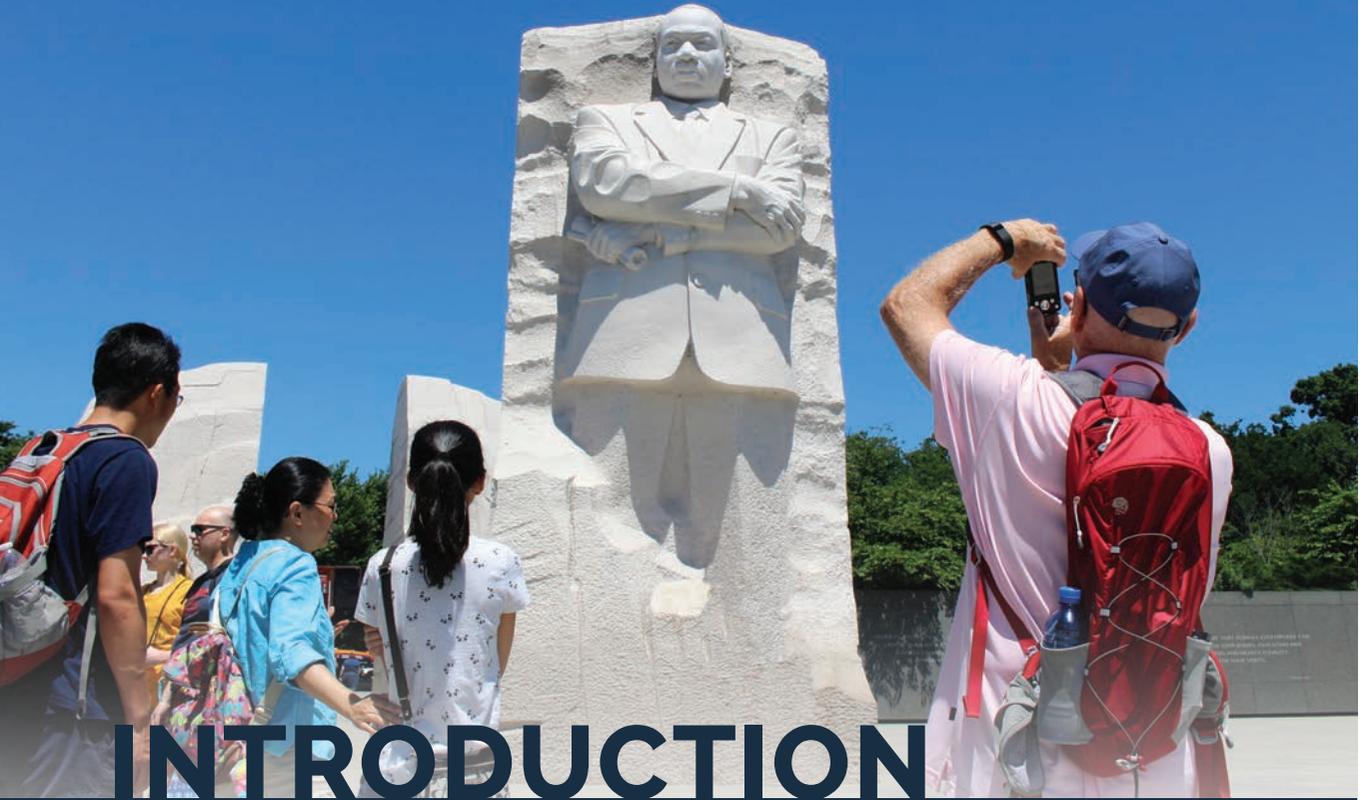
History is a dynamic course of study that will help you become an inventive and capable thinker, researcher, writer, and communicator. Take a moment to ponder those roles, as well as the projects, courses, or jobs that inspired you to experiment with them.

The history major encourages teamwork and trains students to approach issues from diverse viewpoints on the road to making informed decisions. Can you recall an instructor or fellow student who compelled you to reckon with an idea that ran counter to your experience or beliefs?

Historical research requires an apt use of primary sources, secondary sources, and an array of technology- and web-based resources—building a skill set that makes history graduates valuable assets to a variety of organizations. Few disciplines on your campus will come close to demanding

the kind of writing and effective argumentation that your degree requires. And because history students take responsibility for much of their own learning and research, they can approach the job market with the confidence born of genuine independence.

So when you begin looking through job ads and job descriptions, don't limit yourself. Instead, take a step back and ask yourself what skills you have that answer their needs, and consider how you can articulate those skills in the general terms above as well as in ways specific to your unique experience of a distinguished discipline.



# INTRODUCTION

## Many Paths, One Degree

Sarah Fenton

Reasons to pursue a degree in history abound—some of them spontaneous, idealistic, and idiosyncratic; others carefully considered, pragmatic, and forward-looking.

The six essays that follow suggest some of the ways that decisions to study history overlap one another and deepen over time. History is a major to fall in love with and fall back on. The essayists tackle the reasons for (and results of) their chosen

major from notably different angles—not to promote any one path but to convey instead a sense of the diverse roads leading toward, through, and out into the world from inside a history classroom.

# An Education to Last a Lifetime:

## Conversations with the Past, Stories for the Present

Claire Bond Potter

When students ask why I chose a history major in college, I tell them the truth: I didn't. But when I think back to what I got from history courses while pursuing another major, the reasons I came to love history are clear.

As I traveled through time, space, and culture, I embraced experiences and lives not my own. In dark lecture halls illuminated by a slide at the front of the room, I listened to 16th-century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci teaching the Ming court to love God through its own Confucian tradition. When history professor John Merriman signaled Robespierre's final moment of terror on earth by smashing his fist on the lectern, I imagined my own head tumbling into the guillotine basket. After reading about the comradeship of 19th-century New England factory girls, who were disciplined to the industrial clock but freed their minds through reading at night, I wondered for the first time: Who made my clothes?

History's most basic task is to help us explore the astonishing breadth of human experience. It teaches empathy for people we will never meet and links their stories to our own, while at the same time reminding us that the differences between past and present matter profoundly. We may even begin to notice the past—to paraphrase historian Lucy Maynard Salmon, the first woman to be a member of the American Historical Association's executive committee—in the objects scattered about our own backyards and campuses. Venturing farther, we will see the world with new eyes, noticing "stumbling stones" that an artist has placed in the streets of German cities to mark the homes of Holocaust victims; an abandoned factory in an American Rust Belt city where union workers rolled Chevrolets off the line; or Catholic churches that commemorate brown-skinned saints draped in indigenous robes.

When you decide you want more tools to explore the past, you will learn that history is a pleasantly slow discipline in a fast world, one that brings you into respectful conversation with the living as well as the dead.

**Research and writing are acts of exploration, but they are also acts of deliberation that require taking other people's ideas seriously, especially when they contradict your own.**

History teaches us the skills to assemble and organize lots of facts; it teaches us the patience to try, fail, and try again as we assemble our research into an argument. You may begin to notice the contemporary strength of what comedian Stephen Colbert called "truthiness"—explanations that ask us to mistake powerful feelings for knowledge. At this stage, you will know to evaluate other people's research, look at a problem from as many plausible angles as possible, privilege primary accounts about the period or person in question, and dig into secondary sources.

As you commit to historical research, perhaps as a history major, you will learn when it is important to be in conversation with others, in person or online, and when it is best to explore your own mind. "Much of the historian's work is necessarily lonely," former AHA president Linda K. Kerber reflected in 2006. "We generally read alone in a quiet room, we write—on paper or on a computer screen—alone, we plot our plans for

classes alone.” Attempts to understand others, whether in the present or the past, require a balance of solitude and connection. Under such circumstances, historians cultivate empathy (the capacity to see, feel, and interpret the inner lives of others) as well as the detachment that allows them not to get caught up in one truth at the expense of another. Of course, when we are alone we are not really alone. Historical study populates the imagination with engaging people and ideas that illuminate the human past; introduces us to larger historical, political, social, and cultural transformations; and allows us to reflect on the choices and challenges of the world we live in now.

Whether or not you go to graduate school in history, you will know you have become a historian when you have learned to love research, not just for the many stories contained in old archives but also for the satisfaction of writing new stories.

“A poet loves words, a painter loves paint,” historian E. P. Thompson explained to an interviewer in 1976. “I found a fascination in getting to the bottom of everything, in the sources themselves.” Conveying that knowledge

to others—whether as a teacher, a journalist, a lawyer, or in any other profession in which historians share their talents—requires the cultivation of narrative techniques that are the equal of those mastered by any novelist.

A few years after graduation from college, I found, to my great surprise, that history courses I had chosen almost at random had fanned intellectual and creative desires that couldn’t be satisfied unless I went to graduate school and became a historian myself.

Most people who study history don’t become historians or even history minors or majors. Instead, studying history helps them use their knowledge of the past to think about the present.

It helps them tackle puzzling problems by asking the right questions, doing research, and distinguishing good sources from poor ones. Perhaps most important, the study of history helps us become more human—developing empathy and compassion as we learn to understand not only our own past but the pasts of people unlike us whose lives and futures are tangled up with our own.

# The History Major:

## Opening Doors to Life in a Global Economy

John Fea

Tara was a history major as an undergraduate. She works now at a children's hospital in the Republic of Malawi, in southeastern Africa, spending time with sick children, building relationships with their parents, empathizing with their struggles, and then telling their stories to Americans through a variety of media outlets.

Tara writes well, listens carefully, and tells a good story. During her job interview, Tara explained to her future employers that she spent four years of college learning to step outside her own moment in time in order to understand the hopes, dreams, struggles, and mindsets of people from another era or those with beliefs that did not conform to her own. She learned all these things as a student of history. She landed this job not in spite of the fact that she studied history in college but because of it.

Brian is the CEO of a large financial analysis company in Raleigh, North Carolina. He writes columns for *Forbes* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal* and appears regularly on the Fox Business Network and Bloomberg Television. Brian wants to hire history majors. He believes that any good and well-rounded liberal arts education provides a strong foundation for business—since his work requires the ability to write, speak, and think clearly—and describes history as “singularly the best discipline for success in business.” Brian explains, “In history, you learn and become immersed in why people and groups do things over an extended period of time. History validates that people and organizations act in clearly recognizable patterns.” It teaches, he adds, “human nature.”

Brad is a police officer in Colorado Springs with two degrees in history. At first glance, there seems little connection between the study of history and the work of a police officer. But

Brad reminds us that the majority of an officer's time consists of “documenting, recording, and preparing different cases, documents and reports, many of which end up in court.” The study of history has informed Brad's ability to analyze a crime scene or write a report of a crime from various perspectives. He has become skilled at sifting through witness statements, which he compares to interpreting primary sources.

We live in the midst of a rapidly changing marketplace in which very few twentysomethings pursue the career they trained for in college. Many will change careers multiple times over the next two decades.

**As a bedrock liberal arts discipline, history offers a host of transferable skills that will serve young people well as they navigate that volatile marketplace.**

In her book *You Majored in What?*, liberal arts career counselor Katharine Brooks argues that the goal of finding a major that will lead to an ultimate and specific career does not conform to reality. Her research shows that art majors become lawyers, chemistry majors teach English in Korea, economics majors become veterinarians, religion majors work for MTV, and English majors become psychotherapists.

The study of history prepares one for life in a global economy. Historical thinking skills are widely marketable. Students of history learn to think contextually, to recognize change over time, to grapple with the complexity of the human experience, and to distinguish cause and effect. The practice of empathy—working to understand the needs, beliefs, and emotions of people on their own terms—is an essential skill in a host of fields, from medicine to marketing.

**Students of history learn to tell stories. They take data and make meaning of it.**

They can turn a spreadsheet into a compelling narrative to help sell a product or to inform people about issues relevant to their lives. They read critically and excel at research, whether in the newsroom or the law office.

While students of history accumulate knowledge that contributes to precisely the kind of cultural literacy necessary to sustaining a strong republic, they also develop the skills that lead to meaningful work. A recent study by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences found that upon reaching the midpoint of their careers, history majors garnered median salaries equivalent to, if not higher than, the wages of those who pursued most other college degrees.

Students with degrees in history must be prepared to articulate how the disciplinary skills and practices they acquired in college translate into specific jobs and how their experiences off campus—through internships, study abroad, volunteer work—intersect with their scholarly training and the needs of the marketplace. Strong undergraduate history curricula will incorporate career preparation while working closely with career professionals on campus to help students understand the transferable skills they are gaining by way of their course work and extracurricular opportunities.

Many history majors choose this field because they are passionate about it. As Brooks writes,

**“It’s hard to argue with that high a level of engagement in a subject—their passion will translate to better grades, better relationships with professors (for recommendations), and a better quality of life than pursuing something they aren’t interested in just because it’s ‘practical.’”**

This is wonderful advice, but let’s also remember that history is practical. Majoring in history is not only a wise choice if you aim to mature intellectually, participate in a deliberative and diverse democracy, and change the world—it is also a very good economic decision.

“History helped me truly understand the world we live in, something I now try to help my students do in my own classrooms.”

**Carlos Contreras**  
*Professor of History*  
Grossmont College



## Connecting Past to Present: The History Major in Our Communities

Johann N. Neem

History enriches our experience and understanding of our lives, but we must learn to see the history around us everywhere.

We are surrounded by historical questions waiting to be asked. Why does our government work the way it does? Why do people walk or talk or dress as they do? Why do we eat what we eat, or not eat what we do not eat? Whether we are walking down the street or trying to understand something we read or saw on the Internet, history connects the past to the present, helping us understand how our world—and we—came to be. When we look upon the world historically, we open ourselves up to new insights about the

present, and the world around us comes alive. It is filled with questions. True historians know that the joy of history is found in these questions, not just in answers.

Learning history also encourages our sense of belonging. Each of us is part of multiple communities that give our lives meaning. We belong to nations, religions, small groups, and professions. We are shaped by our economic conditions, our ethnic background, and our

gender. Understanding the overlapping and sometimes contradictory histories of these different communities deepens our connections to them. We gain insight into, appreciation for, and sometimes a necessary skepticism regarding our own beliefs and practices. We become better caretakers of our communities, even when that requires using historical knowledge to criticize the present. Most of all, we discover that we are not the first to wrestle with the kinds of questions that possess us. We have much to learn from those who preceded us.

History sheds light on the most important issues we face today. Take the idea of race: The writer James Baldwin wondered, in 1965, why we see people as black and white. Racism is not natural, but most people took it for granted; they did not recognize that their ideas about race were shaped by history. As Baldwin observed, “the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.”

Yet history is not only about today. It also takes us to distant places, fertilizing our imaginations.

**By studying people and places far removed from our current lives, we become aware of other ways to be human.**

The strangeness of the past enables us to step back and look at our society and ourselves from a new perspective—indeed, we might start to look a bit strange to ourselves! Making sense of other societies also encourages empathy for different cultures around the world. We thus study history to simultaneously situate ourselves in the present and to distance ourselves from it.

**Studying history fosters a sense of wonder about the world, the kind of wonder that nurtures intellectual curiosity.**

History is part of a broader liberal arts education. Liberal arts graduates are well prepared for a range of professions—thanks to their analytical skills and acquired knowledge. At the same time, students in the liberal arts seek knowledge as its own end rather than to prepare for a specific job. History majors are always trying to know more about their world, a drive that serves them well as citizens, as participants in the workforce, and as human beings.

Studying history makes our world more interesting. One could go through the world and experience it superficially, just as one could walk through a forest without any knowledge about trees or ecosystems. It might be pretty, or perhaps scary, but meaningless and shallow. Because our world is made by history, and because knowledge of the past offers new perspectives about the present, studying history gives us deeper insight into our lives and the lives of others. These are reasons enough to pursue it.

# The Landscape after College:

## Putting Your History Skills to Work

Sarah Shurts

In a society where the cost of higher education continues to rise and the prospect of a job after college becomes less certain, it is no wonder that students show increasing interest in the marketability of the degree they choose.

The question “what can you do with a history degree?” reflects a realistic concern about preparation for life after college rather than disinterest in the intrinsic value of a liberal education. For many students, the selection of a major is not purely about pursuing their intellectual passion; it is also about developing the skills needed for a career.

What skills do employers look for, and how does a degree in history prepare students to meet those expectations? According to a professor of business at Rutgers University, focus groups indicate that many employers believe “technical skills can be taught” and are often “firm specific.” This makes the so-called soft skills—from interpersonal communication to decision making—the kind that set certain applicants apart and help them win jobs. An information technology (IT) employer at Novartis echoes this view, explaining that even in IT, “employers do value that outside thinking and analytical reasoning that history majors have.” If these soft skills can help a student stand out in the job market, then what specialized skills do history majors develop, and how can they convey what they have learned to potential employers?

At the most fundamental level, history majors are taught to ask broad questions, search for specific answers, and craft narratives to make those answers clear and compelling to readers and listeners. In formulating the right questions and hunting for answers—pursuing leads into places both predictable and surprising—a history major finds, reads, and critiques a tremendous

amount of material. History majors must learn to recognize reliable sources, to move beyond established sources for elusive information, and to gather evidence systematically, comprehensively, and carefully. Reading this way is good training for handling dense information in any job, but reading for a history major is not just a way to accumulate information—it is also a way to hear many and differing voices on a particular question. It encourages students to consider multiple perspectives, opinions, approaches, and arguments, and to weigh and challenge what they learn.

**Historians learn to recognize and consider author biases, personal backgrounds, social context, and buried motives.**

Even after accumulating, reading, and synthesizing a variety of perspectives, historians are taught to consider what these sources cannot provide and to recognize the lack of absolute truth in answer to any one question. Learning to approach questions, research, and reading in this way makes history students critical consumers of information. They are exacting; they recognize an argument’s weaknesses and its strengths; and they are quick to challenge inaccuracy, unreliability, or insufficient evidence.

Historians don’t stop at gathering and critiquing information; they also shape it into an engaging and convincing narrative. Because history students are asked to write constantly, they learn

to communicate ideas with speed, clarity, and elegance. They must organize their thoughts and their materials; understand others' arguments and structure their own; develop engaging narratives; and communicate in a way that speaks to a variety of audiences. Employers are quite aware that those who can approach information with a critical eye, consider diverse perspectives, structure an argument, and translate it successfully to a range of audiences are assets to any business or organization.

Perhaps what makes history unique among the liberal arts is the teaching of change and continuity over time. Governments, technology, international relationships, workforces and demographics, styles, wealth, markets, and resources all undergo constant change. Historians know how change happens; they have identified it in the past and can gauge its occurrence in the present. Employers appreciate employees who can prepare for, identify, and react well to change and who can help prepare a business or institution to weather and benefit from it. Handling change well in the future derives in part from knowing what happened in the past and how changes were handled. What was successful and what failed? Historians do not end their assessment there. They can identify business trends and political patterns—citing past precedent to help guide present decisions—but they also know the importance of context and contingency. Historians are valuable to businesses, organizations, and employers not only for their knowledge of the past but also because they know not to view the past as a blueprint for the future. They see historical precedent as a lesson, not a litmus test, for present decisions.

A degree in history requires study of many regions, Western and non-Western, and encourages students to think beyond themselves and their own experience to broader communities across time and place. The appreciation students gain for the larger world teaches them to find common ground with others but also to value and respect what is different.

## History majors learn to privilege exchange, collaboration, and diversity over isolation, insularity, or parochialism.

A study of the past also teaches students that people—and their behaviors, laws and customs, structures of power, and values and beliefs—are products of their collective history and cannot always be easily altered or replaced. Businesses and organizations need employees who appreciate cultural differences, value exchange and growth, and understand the innumerable ways that a community's past can influence its present.

In general, history students are versatile learners who value other disciplines that help inform their work. Historians regularly move outside their own disciplines to study foreign languages, statistics, economics, politics, cultural studies, international business, the arts and humanities, and even science, technology, and medicine in order to better understand the historical context of their topic. Because they familiarize themselves with disciplines not their own, they are better able to draw on diverse sources when initiating conversations or developing solutions to problems. This eclectic knowledge base and the ability to synthesize ideas culled from it are valuable assets for employers who need out-of-the-box thinking and innovative approaches.

History graduates are well positioned for a broad variety of career paths, something employers will recognize as students learn to translate their skills into a language that employers understand. History is neither an indulgence of the elite nor a frivolous distraction from career preparation. A degree in history promotes intellectual contemplation and civic responsibility, but it also teaches essential skills to help students stand out in a challenging market and contribute to their world through their chosen career.

# What Employers Want:

## Thoughts from a History BA in Business

John Rowe

I write as a University of Wisconsin history major, a lawyer, and a retired utility-industry executive who headed three different companies over a 28-year period.

I can answer the question “what do employers value in history majors?”—more specifically, what does a history major bring to an electric utility like Exelon, or to Tesla, Microsoft, Apple, Lucasfilm, or Morgan Stanley?—with real confidence and relative precision. We bring perspective on the flux of institutions; we think and write with clarity; we have a grasp of enduring human foibles; and we find delicious relevance in vignettes. I remember George Lucas at Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History explaining that the inspiration for his Star Wars creatures came from the collections held by such museums.

Less elegant but more on point may be the Byzantine maxims about using the Pechenegs to fight the Slavs or Bulgars, or the German general staff’s view that the Polish and Ukrainian plains were the best place to fight the Soviets. A good utility executive finds allies in unlikely places. For example, advocating a carbon tax is not only sound policy, it provides excellent air cover for operating a nuclear fleet. Meet the enemy as far as you can.

A more complex and vexing illustration: whatever value I ascribe to markets and property rights, my successes as a utility CEO had more to do with understanding that the property rights in owning a dam on a river, operating a nuclear power plant, or stringing wires down a street are more fragile than those of an individual owning a bank account. A history degree helped me see that rights are not as absolute as I might like them to be.

My own experiences are in an industry that is highly regulated (though not in straightforward ways) and highly technical (in 1930s ways).

**Whatever the era or product, high-tech industries live or die on their ability to anticipate what the customer wants before she does.**

Surely those are liberal arts insights, not merely market survey data. Once, while addressing a group of software company employees on the pace of change, I pointed out a conference-room window and said, “the average age of the power plants keeping those lights on is 40 years, and the average age of the wires is 30 years.” Software changes even more rapidly than computer chips, but determining what is changing rapidly, what is changing slowly, and how people respond to the pace of change requires a particular skill set—and these are the kinds of questions addressed squarely by historians.

So here is my quick advice to history students:

1. By all means study history. Clio (history’s muse) is an endless source of fascination and very good company when the world seems to be going to hell around you.
2. If you do not plan to teach history or obtain a professional degree, pick up some courses that will be relevant in your first job and do some summer work to extend and enhance your academic degree. Be useful promptly; seek perspective later.

3. Hunt. I obtained my first CEO job at a little company in Maine by driving to each director's home—not to show that I knew Maine but to show that I would learn. Employers expect to teach you, but they want to know that you appreciate the need to learn.
4. When applying your critical thinking to frail human institutions, remember that the very best steam turbine is only about 40 percent efficient, and no human institution is as efficient as a steam engine.

My farming parents taught me that work is something that is useful to its consumer. Professors George Mosse and Willard Hurst—great historians both—are the reasons that I now teach high school history and serve as chairman of the Illinois Holocaust Museum. Together they helped me succeed as a CEO and keep my own successes, failures, contributions, and beliefs in perspective.

“Your understanding of history will come in handy as long as you’re willing to utilize it.”

**Shaka Smart**  
*Basketball Coach*  
University of Texas

# The Well-Rounded History Graduate:

## Professional, Citizen, Human

Frank Valadez

One of the things I love best about directing the Division for Public Education at the American Bar Association is promoting public understanding of the law and the legal system.

The word history does not appear in that goal, and yet there is no way to achieve it without thoughtful historical study.

Every citizen—entitled to due process; obliged to serve on juries; voting to retain or remove judges—would benefit from understanding that the American legal and court systems did not always exist in their current form. They have evolved for more than 200 years, since they were established in the late 18th century by the US Constitution and congressional action. It is worth considering where our rights come from; the ways that evolving “standards of decency” have led to changes in the ways laws are understood and applied; and how technological, demographic, and other social changes transformed the legal system. Historical study expands our understanding of these issues.

One might also wish to understand—or at least to learn more about—how the longer history of legal systems in human society shaped the American legal system. How did the English common law tradition shape American practice? How did the Napoleonic Code make Louisiana a little different from other states? And what medieval or ancient legal systems, practices, or ideas provide the deeper background for a modern understanding of justice?

Historical study can place our procedures and beliefs in broader, richer context, from which we might learn how best to maintain and strengthen our institutions to pursue justice and defend liberty.

Representative government requires citizens with a knowledge and understanding of history, but the skills of the historian—inquiry, research, use of evidence, logical communication—contribute to successful leadership in many professions as well. Recently, I attended a program on marketing and branding at a leading business school. The readings and discussion focused on case studies from contemporary business history. To analyze the cases, we drew on bedrock historical thinking skills: inquiry (what problems did the owners and managers want to solve? what was the economic context for their decisions?); research (collecting information, including historical sales data and the histories of different companies and brands); and constructing an evidence-based argument (analyzing the data and making a plan based on rigorously collected research). In a world of rapid economic change, the ability to grasp and explain the meaning of change is a skill of significant value in the marketplace.

The study of history can also enrich one’s life outside of the civic and professional spheres by unlocking the meanings of art, literature, music, food, and so on—because everything has a

history. Not long ago, I watched a documentary about the impact of electricity on the music industry over the past century. In another example of the professional use of historical thinking skills, the documentarians conducted interviews and presented a range of other sources to show how new ways to perform and reach audiences as well as new economic relationships emerged as the technology of sound evolved. I gained a fresh appreciation for the impact made by artists the documentary covered, and I began to hear things in the music that I had not noticed before.

### Finally, history promotes an ethical framework that fosters understanding, empathy, and humility.

The French historian Marc Bloch put it this way: “When all is said and done, a single word, ‘understanding,’ is the beacon light of our studies. . . . We are far too prone to judge. It is so easy to denounce. We are never sufficiently understanding.” The more time I spend studying history, the more I appreciate the variation between and among human societies around the world and over time. Nevertheless, what I do not know dwarfs what I do know. Studying history promotes a healthy humility regarding the extent of our own knowledge and certainties, creating openness to the ideas of others with different experiences, information, approaches, attitudes, and views. In a work environment, this kind of humility contributes to effective teamwork and successful collaboration. The more that diverse team members, partners, and clients are encouraged to participate in the planning and execution of a project, the more likely it is that the full range of the team’s talents will contribute to the project’s success.

This kind of personal and cultural humility fosters an acceptance of the views of others and welcomes them into conversations about politics and government as well as business. It is an attitude that is slow to demonize others for diverse views and one that recognizes the possibility that the exercise of one person’s rights may come at the expense of another’s. It values the participation of as many people as possible in public life—political, civic, professional, and cultural—and it takes an expansive view of who is included in a historical community and a contemporary polity.

Why study history? Because an approach that calls on multiple disciplines to learn about the world provides support for social responsibility, engaged citizenship, and the institutions of democratic societies; sharpens tools for career development; contributes to the enjoyment of life by unlocking the beauty of art and culture; and fosters an ethical framework that promotes the quest for understanding, empathy, and personal humility. A better question would be, why not study history?

# In Their Own Words

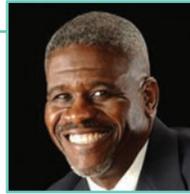


**Lauren Reuscher** is a graduate of James Madison University whose work in communications and marketing as an integrated-campuses manager at George Mason University requires her to “write and edit information that is distributed to internal and external audiences. My history degree trained me to carefully consider the way information is presented, to analyze the source and impact of information, and to reflect on the context and environment in which it will be received.”



**Martin Owings**, a senior software development manager at Merrill Corporation who earned his BA in history from

Metropolitan State University, knows that “every good organization values a diversity of skills and experiences. History students are well trained to bring critical thinking and unique perspectives to their work.” He advises job candidates: “Highlight those attributes when applying and interviewing. Be confident that you understand and can see things others may not. You have been trained to diligently and intentionally understand complex issues, whether they are technical or human in nature. The ranks of leadership and talented individual contributors are filled with people who have a history degree. Be confident; the world needs you.”



**Ira O. Credle**, a senior training specialist in US Department of the Army with a degree from Elon College (now Elon University), writes simply:

“History majors make good decision-makers—leaders who can perform in a variety of occupations.”



**Janet Arias-Martinez**, director of community engagement for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, writes that

“learning about the impact of human events big and small” during her years studying history at Ball State University “fueled my personal drive to become more civically engaged and to work for social impact.”



**Towner Blackstock** graduated with a degree in history from Davidson College and is now the principal of his own consulting practice. “I advise

construction companies on the purchase and implementation of enterprise software systems,” he writes. “I research products and the market, and present facts and analysis in writing and in person. Often I have to make judgments using limited facts, while avoiding biases. This is not far from what I did as a history major writing term papers!”



**Amy Venuto**, a consultant at Slalom and a graduate of Muhlenberg College, writes: “History teaches us to look at a situation from all

perspectives, and as a business analyst that is what I do every day to solve problems and arrive at the best possible solution.”



**Jessica Cantrell's** work as development assistant at Tellus Science Museum in Cartersville, Georgia, requires that she use "the critical

thinking and writing skills I developed as a history major every single day." The skills she honed at Berry College "are put to good use when it's time to conduct prospect research on potential donors."



Asked how her history major influenced her as an individual and as a citizen, **Katherine Greenberg**—Vassar College alumna and assistant

commissioner at the New York City Commission on Human Rights—responds: "Tremendously. Studying history helped me to develop a process, a framework through which to understand people and places that are vastly different from myself and my daily experience. It enhanced my ability to communicate with and understand others, as well as take responsibility for my own role in my community."



**Benjamin Tsai** graduated with a degree in history from the University of California, Davis. Now a senior tax analyst for the University of California,

Benjamin credits his major for "developing my critical thinking skills, which proved to be useful in my job performing tax research that requires the understanding of the facts and circumstances and analyzing those with the tax laws and regulations."



**Dana Follis Huffman**, who became an eastern regional vice president at Paycom after graduating with a degree in history from the University

of California, Davis, had this to contribute: "This may seem like a rather simple note, but I can attribute some of my conversational skills to my history education. I think when you learn the history of the world you have a much better understanding and knowledge of different people's cultures. In this day and age when you are exposed to such a diverse audience of people it is definitely in your favor to know about a broad spectrum of culture. Understanding the importance of acknowledging—and being very interested in—culture is something I have found to be very useful. The art of conversation as well as storytelling is an essential skill set for a career in sales."



Asked how his major influenced him as an individual and a citizen, **Jayson Myers**—a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh who

went on to become a retirement specialist at Nationwide—answered expansively: "My sense of what it means to be a citizen of this country, how to navigate our political discourse, and what actions are required to be a responsible citizen have been almost entirely shaped by my majoring in history." Jayson believes "the questions that make life worth living" are posed in history courses; they "keep me pacing during the day and keep me up at night."

# Contributors

**Loren Collins** is a proud graduate of the undergraduate history program at Humboldt State University in California. He has seen the value of the foundation it provided in his later endeavors: earning his MA in sociology and working to build career curricula for a variety of disciplines and programs at Humboldt State.

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**Johann N. Neem** is professor of history at Western Washington University. He is author of *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (2017) and *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (2008). His new book is *Education or Degrees? On the Virtues of College in an Age of Reform*.

**Sarah Olzawski** is an academic counselor at the University of Oklahoma College of Arts and Sciences. She holds a bachelor of arts with distinction in history and a master of library and information studies from the University of Oklahoma.

**Claire Potter** is professor of history and executive editor of Public Seminar at the New School in New York City. She is co-editor of *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past* (2018).

**John Rowe** is chairman emeritus of Exelon Corporation, a former chairman of the Chicago History Museum and the Field Museum, and chairman of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and the visiting committee of the Oriental Institute. He has also chaired the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation and the Illinois Institute of Technology.

**Sarah Shurts** is associate professor of history at Bergen Community College in New Jersey and the author of *Resentment and the Right: French Intellectual Identity Reimagined, 1898–2000* (2017). She has worked with the AHA as a member of the Tuning the History Discipline project, the James Harvey Robinson Prize Committee, and the 2020 Program Committee, and is also co-editor of the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*.

**Paul B. Sturtevant** is a medievalist, social scientist, and public historian. He received a PhD in medieval studies from the University of Leeds and is audience research specialist at the Smithsonian Institution, as well as editor in chief of *The Public Medievalist* (<http://www.publicmedievalist.com>).

**Frank Valadez** is the director of the Division for Public Education at the American Bar Association. He earned a bachelor's degree in history from Northwestern University and a master's degree in American history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

# Credits

## **El Castillo (Pyramide des Kukulcán) in Chichén Itzá.**

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## **Demonstrators in Tahrir Square in 2011 demanding the removal of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and his government.**

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## **Dust bowl farmer driving tractor with young son in New Mexico.**

Dorothea Lange/Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs/Library of Congress (p. 4)

## **Four African American women at Atlanta University, Georgia.**

Thomas E. Askew/African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition/Library of Congress (p. 5)

## **A Composite Map of the Ming Empire (Da Ming Hunyi Tu) as it would have appeared in AD 1389.**

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## **Great Wall of China at Mutianyu near Beijing.**

Fabien Dany - [www.fabiendany.com/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 2.5](http://www.fabiendany.com/Wikimedia%20Commons/CC%20BY-SA%202.5) (p. 9)

## **Newspaper office in Brockton, Massachusetts.**

Jack Delano/Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs/Library of Congress (p. 12)

## **Six shirtwaist strikers marched to City Hall to demand an end to abuse by police, 1909.**

Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University via Flickr/CC BY 2.0 (p. 15)

## **Ladies Tailors Strike in New York City.**

George Grantham Bain Collection/Library of Congress (p. 17)

## **The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC.**

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## **Coffee in the garden.**

Daniel Ridgway Knight/Wikimedia Commons (p. 23)

## **The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC.**

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## **Shulman's Market in Washington, DC.**

Louise Rosskam/Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs/Library of Congress (p. 29)

## **Quote from Shaka Smart taken from "Shaka Smart's commencement speech**

[May 20, 2016]," YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUfBz11F4HU> (p. 29)





This booklet explores the intrinsic value of studying history and the range of careers that are available to history majors.

Through clear graphs and informal prose, readers will find hard data, practical advice, and answers to common questions about the study of history and the value it affords to individuals, their workplaces, and their communities. A resource for intellectual exploration and personal inspiration, it includes a statement shaped by cooperating faculty at over 100 colleges and universities describing the abilities and habits of mind that students develop in history programs at diverse institutions. The booklet's contributors include alumni working in a wide range of fields and occupations as well as professional historians. Together, they suggest ways that today's college students can prepare themselves to

bring historical thinking to bear in solving tomorrow's problems.

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For more resources from the American Historical Association, please visit [historians.org/whystudyhistory](http://historians.org/whystudyhistory).



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