

History and Interdisciplinarity

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By *Adam Chapnick*

I work in what must be one of the most interdisciplinary academic departments in the country.

For the last decade, the Royal Military College of Canada's Department of Defence Studies has included eleven full-time faculty. One has a PhD in chemistry; one is a defence economist; one is a psychologist; one is a military sociologist; two of us are historians; and there are five political scientists. One of those political scientists has an MBA. Another has a master's degree in studies in law. A third has an MA in War Studies. A fourth has one in international affairs (as do I). Two of the political scientists are francophones, as is our military sociologist. The defence economist and psychologist are both military veterans.

In spite, or perhaps because, of this disciplinary diversity, we also publish together quite often. Over the last decade, our collaborations have resulted in three textbooks, at least two peer-reviewed articles, and a number of opinion pieces in military and civilian outlets.

What we have in common, it seems, is a collective commitment to professional military education, and to academic collegiality. When we think about "fit" here, our primary consideration is how potential colleagues' scholarship might benefit our curriculum, practically and directly.

This past spring, we had the rare opportunity to add two new permanent faculty. Our job ad stipulated that candidates had to have "a Ph.D. in military history, strategic studies/defence and security studies or war studies, or a relevant doctoral degree in the humanities or social sciences with a research/teaching focus on the conduct, consequences, complexity, and practices of conflict."

Although I did not serve on the hiring committee, I attended all of the job talks. I have also debriefed with the committee itself. I share my observations here to support historians who are contemplating applications for interdisciplinary faculty positions now or in the future.

First, the good news. Historians were well-represented on the committee's short list. Three of the seven finalists who were interviewed had PhDs in history, and we hired one of them. What's more, all three historians acquitted themselves admirably during their job talks. They were well-prepared, poised, and knowledgeable. Their publication records were impressive, their commitment to teaching was evident, and they were collegial.

They also, to various degrees, revealed what seems to me to be a common weakness among members of our discipline who seek to communicate with general audiences: at times they struggled to understand what about historical research might interest generalists and, more important, what historians can bring to an interdisciplinary program. Indeed, the historians tended to have the most trouble demonstrating how they might *stretch* – intellectually and practically, in the classroom – to add value to a community of teaching and learning non-specialists.

I'll use an anecdote to explain: A few months ago, I attended a conference about the legacy of Canada's twelfth prime minister, Louis St. Laurent. It was the first meeting of historians I had been to in ages, and I was struck by how much time was spent discussing research methods. I enjoyed sharing stories about archives, archivists, and those strange, tangential anecdotes that one picks up while deeply immersed in a set of papers or fonds.

The historians who interviewed with us would have been comfortable at the St. Laurent conference. They all spoke in detail about their sources. As an historian, I was impressed, but as a professor of defence studies, I was significantly less interested. The candidates' CVs had already demonstrated their research productivity, and their passion for their subject was evident in how they discussed their future goals. But we don't have a PhD program at the Canadian Forces College, and most of our students must complete their graduate-level programs in 10½ months. Put frankly, expertise in the archives doesn't mean much to us.

On the other hand, understanding how to navigate the Tri-Council ethics review process quickly can be helpful. Experience in oral history is a plus. Awareness of on-line primary sources that might benefit student research is also value-added. In sum, we are less interested in *historians*, per se, than we are in talented *scholars and teachers* who understand, and believe in, student learning, and who can connect their expertise to our curriculum.

Just as important, if not more so, everyone in my department already appreciates how an historical approach can add context in the classroom. Indeed, many of my non-historian colleagues do a fair bit of historical research. So, telling us that what an historian can bring to a seminar about contemporary events is historical perspective doesn't stand out. In fact, it risks offending scholars from other disciplines who might take from such comments that they themselves lack historical understanding.

Similarly, history is not the only discipline that stresses clear writing and critical thinking. Certainly, members of my department want to confirm that potential future colleagues believe these skills are important, but mentioning them will hardly leave a lasting impression in an interdisciplinary job talk.

We are more interested in how you link your research to "defence studies" as we define it in our curriculum. Have you interviewed contemporary civilian and military defence practitioners? Are you an active part of military or veterans' networks? Did your historical training expose you to particular pedagogical techniques (I use case studies, for example) that might resonate with our students? Has your experience compiling hundreds, if not thousands, of pages of notes taught you lessons about research and writing that you can share? Has the impact of the evolving nature of historical sources in a digital age taught you lessons that you can pass on to current and future military and public service leaders?

In short, we know that you can think like a historian. What we need to know is how your historical training adds value when you teach our students to think like candidates for a degree in defence studies.

For historians who have never completed an interdisciplinary program, or taught in one, what I'm asking for can be a significant stretch. But there are ways to minimize the challenge:

- Become an associate member of a scholarly organization in another discipline.
- Attend not just interdisciplinary conferences, but the occasional disciplinary one in another field. (I've probably learned as much about historians and the historical process at meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association as I have at the CHA.)
- Think of yourself as a teacher of students, rather than just as a teacher of history.
- Seek out interdisciplinary teaching opportunities and perhaps even design an interdisciplinary course for your teaching portfolio.

In my experience, a background in history is well-suited to interdisciplinary studies. Historians are typically intellectually curious, analytically rigorous, and good writers. We understand the importance of seeing the big picture, and are comfortable with a variety of teaching and learning methodologies. As a profession, however, we probably need to work a bit harder on how we explain the value of what we can do to others.

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