

Why Teach History?

Part 1

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In June of 2020 the Minister of Education in Australia's federal government announced the "Job Ready Graduates Package," a series of reforms to university funding designed "to deliver more job-ready graduates in the disciplines and regions where they are needed most and help drive the nation's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic."¹ The proposed changes would, among other things, greatly reduce university tuition in the so-called STEM programs (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) while significantly increasing them for the humanities. The education minister made clear the purpose of this is to "incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices"² in selecting university programs.

While using market-oriented levers of consumer choice to prioritize science and technology over the humanities in education may be new, the policy direction certainly is not. For years, educational policy makers around the world have used various mechanisms to chip away at the place of the humanities in public school and university curricula in order to increase space for subjects considered more oriented to economic growth and prosperity. New Brunswick, the Canadian province where I live, has engaged enthusiastically in this trend with a series of reforms that emphasize the centrality of economic priorities to public education. These reforms consistently promote a focus on the economically relevant holy trinity of literacy (not literature), numeracy, and science while diminishing the role of the humanities. The latter are included only to the degree they can serve as helping foster "an entrepreneurial mindset."³

One response to this prioritizing of employment as the central end of education among historians and history teachers has been to articulate a range of ways in which the study of history contributes

to employability and success in the workplace. Many history departments or classrooms have posters on the walls outlining the careers to which the study of history might lead. One of the most detailed of these is on the website of the history department of California State University, Bakersfield. It is titled, "What Can I Do With A History Degree?" and lists dozens of possible careers across five broad categories including Law Politics and Public Life, Business and Management, Journalism Publishing and Entertainment, Research and Archival Services, and Education. The categories are colour coded and sized according to "recent data of career paths chosen by history majors."⁴ The Canadian Historical Association has also published its own paper on the subject: "Changing the Conversation: The Value of a Degree in History"⁵ which demonstrates the many career opportunities for those with a degree in history. In addition, the CHA has created a website that contains several examples of history graduates working in various sectors of the economy.⁶

A section of the American Historical Association's (AHA) website is titled "Why Study History." It provides a range of materials to support advocating for the study of history most of which address issues of employment and career satisfaction for those with history degrees. For example, an article titled "History is Not a Useless Major: Fighting Myths with Data" is featured prominently on the site. In that piece Paul B. Sturtevant directly takes on the idea that STEM fields are much more useful areas of study by drawing on data to take on three myths: "Myth 1: History Majors are Underemployed," "Myth Two: A History Major Does Not Provide You With Gainful Employment," and "Myth Three History Majors are Underpaid."⁷

Closer to home, in 2019 Adele Perry, then president of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA), took on a deficit she saw in hiring criteria posted by The Public Service Commission of Canada by writing a letter to the president of that organization making the case that students of history were

well prepared for many jobs in public service. She highlighted the relevant skills learned in the study of history including “excellent research skills,” “analytical skills and the organization of complex materials,” and “interpersonal skills,” and closed her letter by requesting that the Commission “add History as a qualifying degree in your standard advertisement for analysts and related positions.”⁸

In short, advocates of history spend a lot of time and energy directly confronting the idea that the study of history is a dead end in terms of finding satisfying and productive careers. That is all to the good and probably necessary in the current climate, but I think it sells education generally, and history in particular, short. Education ought to be about preparing people for life, and work, while an important and necessary part of that, is not all of it, and perhaps not even the most important part. In our recent book, *The Arts and the Teaching of History: Historical F(r)ictions*, my coauthor Penney Clark and I argue that history’s primary contribution to a person’s education is not in laying a foundation for employment but rather in its fostering of humane and thoughtful citizens. “Facility with the past,” we argue, “is critical to developing a full sense of who we are as human beings both individually and collectively, who the other people are who share the world with us, and how we might engage together in working toward the common good. Studying the past, in other words, is both a humanizing and a civic mission and it has never been more critical than it is today.”⁹

That is not to say that the AHA, the CHA, and other organizations and individuals who advocate for the economic and employment relevance of the study of history only focus on that, ignoring its contribution to fostering human flourishing and thoughtful civic engagement. It does seem to me, however, that while arguments and materials related to the former are ubiquitous and detailed, the latter usually receives much more superficial attention. The poster mentioned above, is a good example. Down a narrow left-hand column of the poster is a list of some of the skills and

dispositions fostered by history that are relevant to engaging productively with others such as the ability to “evaluate contradictory viewpoints” or “develop and practice empathetic thinking.” The central focus and largest space of the poster, however, is dedicated to a listing of possible careers for history majors. That relative relationship is also characteristic of the AHA’s “Why Study History” page. There is acknowledgment and some attention to the civic mission of history education, but the overweening focus is on making the case for its practicality in terms of future work.

My argument is that this arrangement should be reversed. That history educators at all levels need to spend some more time developing a more fully articulated case for the humanizing and civic contributions of history--a case that includes specific examples of what attention to these aspects might look like in classrooms and study groups. I’d love to see posters lining the walls of history departments that outlined the ways in which history contributes to personal enrichment, positive relationships, and effective civic action, as well as those that feature all the careers open to history graduates.

To that end, I plan to get the conversation started by offering three future blogs dealing with how the study of history contributes to developing more complex and effective understandings of the nature of historical truth, how it fosters deep understanding of and empathy for others, and how it can help in thinking through complex social and political issues. There are more areas that might be explored, of course, but these will do for a start. I am hoping the ideas raised will generate discussion, push back, and movement toward a more fully articulated vision of the value of our subject.

The second text in this series of 4 – “Exploring the Nature of Truth”, will be published on the [CHA’s Teaching Blog](#) on 19 October.

¹ Skills and Employment Department of Education, “Better University Funding Arrangements,” Text, Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020), <https://www.dese.gov.au/job-ready/better-university-funding-arrangements>.

² Anisa Purbasari Horton, “Why Australia Is Doubling Fees for Arts Degrees,” 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200728-why-australia-is-charging-more-to-study-history>.

³ Province of New Brunswick, “Everyone At Their Best (Anglophone Sector)” (Fredericton, NB: Province of New Brunswick, 2016), 16.

⁴ “Careers in History,” California State University, Bakersfield, 2020, <https://www.csub.edu/history/Careers-in-History/index.html>.

⁵ See <https://cha-shc.ca/english/cha-publications/what-can-you-do-with-a-history-degree-blog.html>.

⁶ “What to do with a History Degree? Many things!, <https://historydegreediplomehistoire.blog/>.

⁷ Paul B. Sturtevant, “History Is Not a Useless Major: Fighting Myths with Data,” American Historical Association, 2017, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2017/history-is-not-a-useless-major-fighting-myths-with-data>.

⁸ Adele Perry, “The CHA Asks The Public Service Commission to Change Its Advertisements for Employment,” The Canadian Historical Association, 2019, <https://cha-shc.ca/english/what-we-do/what-we-do.html/advocacy/the-cha-asks-the-public-service-commission-to-change-its-advertisements-for-employment>.

⁹ Penney Clark and Alan Sears, *The Arts and the Teaching of History: Historical F(r)ictions*, 1st ed. 2020 edition (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 244.