**PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY**

**Connecting the Dots: Why a History Degree is Useful in the Business World**

Christopher Brooks, February 2015

Most faculty members have heard cynical parents making arguments like, “My kid should go for a straight business degree. I am not paying for this fun stuff, like history. He needs a job to pay off all these loans! Besides, unlike majors such as engineering, computer science, and business, most college degrees are useless, for jobless blowhards. Right?”

In response, I offer the following story.

While studying in Germany, an American legal history graduate student took freelance jobs on the support staffs of various businesses to pay the bills. One day, he put in a bid for an assignment for a pretty big client and was invited to give his sales pitch. The company’s European head of research and development, a German, interviewed him. The discussion began with basic courtesies and talk about what the company needed; there was little discussion about the American’s academic background. About five minutes into the interview, the German pointed to a reproduction of a painting on the wall behind his desk and asked the American, “Who painted that?” The American replied, “Matisse, I think.” The German responded, “Good! Now, what are your thoughts on the Marshall Plan?”

And so the discussion went, for about 10 more minutes, after which time the American interjected: “Excuse me, sir, but why are you asking me all of these history questions?” The German: “Well, we had an American VP who was in a meeting recently with a French client, me, and my boss. The Frenchman looked up to the wall, pointed at the painting before him, this very one, and asked, ‘Who painted that?’ The American VP said, ‘I don’t know. I don’t need to know that stuff.’ At that moment, the French client left the room, along with his three-million-euro account.”

“Why did I ask you about history?” the German continued. “It is important for our business. And since you could answer my questions, you have the job.”

I was that history student, one of the many with history degrees who have been gainfully employed outside of the field.

What about the ones who graduate with “only” a baccalaureate, you ask? More to the point, do degrees in traditional subjects—such as history—have any real-world utility? Well, that depends on your perspective.

While most academics are fulfilled by producing well-rounded, well-read citizens, those footing the college bill often argue that a liberal education is a luxury they cannot afford. They are interested almost solely in ROI: return on investment. All the while, many academics have been reluctant to recommend fields of study with which they are not familiar. Enter the business organizations that need workers who can do the job, or at least do it with minimal training.

To respond to the teeming foes of liberal arts education, faculty members have been saying (for years!) that the liberal arts provide an educational basis. True, but it has not convinced too many parents or ­nontraditional students who are footing the college bills with ROI as their primary goal.

We in academia ask students, “Why are you in college?” The usual reply is, “To get a job,” not “to get an education,” which is the response we academics yearn for. When we ask them why they are required to take general education courses, there is silence or “My adviser told me I needed this,” conveyed with classic bureaucratic flare—that is, no flare at all.

What representatives of higher education seldom, if ever, explain is that the liberal arts can find application in the business world. History is a perfect example.

But what about those who foot the tuition bills? How can recent graduates or their parents pay the bills when it appears that few if any jobs are offered to those with history BAs?

Anne Hyde, a history professor at Colorado College, relays a point history faculty members might consider. “We should, in class and in advising sessions, lay out what students are learning and what this will enable them to do.”2 We are obliged to teach our students that academic training and praxis are not disparate but linked.

Admittedly, one of the issues to overcome is that academics and business leaders often refer to each other as “them” rather than a part of “us.” History faculty with some business experience could be instrumental in effecting change by explaining how the skills acquired in studying history find utility in the corporate workplace. Let’s expose the reciprocal relationship between these studies and business.

How does our discipline benefit someone in the corporate world?

Historians are well-equipped to understand the impact societal development has on financial and nonfinancial events, as well as financial transactions and models. As a graduate student, I was a mere support staff member who produced translations and taught English and negotiation skills. But so many history majors, like one of my own students, who works in sales and support for a Fortune 500 tech company, go further (and his boss has a BA in history as well).

How can the academy benefit from business?

Answer: by paying attention to a diversity of ideas and approaches to problem solving. Colleagues in my department have backgrounds in subjects ranging from music therapy to physics to business. Why is that good? It affords students perspectives on historical events that they never would have had and that benefit the profession as a whole. Inverting that argument, knowing history clearly allows for broader approaches in these fields.

What does a history graduate have that businesses need?

A student of history acquires skills that are fundamental not only to success in academia but also in business. The suite of valuable skills includes:

* Strong analytical skills
* Exceptional oral and written communication skills
* A detail-oriented approach
* Experience presenting research and using technology to do so
* Skills for working independently
* Excellent interpersonal and problem-solving skills
* An ability to meet deadlines in fast-paced environments
* A systemic understanding of human institutions

What most young historians lack are accounting and statistics course work and experience and exposure to advanced software functions. These are the keys to the entry level in many businesses, which is why we must encourage students to enroll in at least a general course in statistics and perhaps a general accounting course, to master Excel, and to take internships that broaden their perspectives. A minor in business could also fill the void.

A 2011 study showed that 16 percent of social science majors end up working in the finance sector, and many more work in areas providing professional services (e.g., accountancy, appraisal, business consultancy, development management, underwriting, public relations, recruiting, and translation). Even more surprising is that 40 percent of graduates with an American history undergraduate degree end up working in management or sales. For general history BAs, the number was 29 percent for the same sectors.3

Given these facts, faculty members must work to convey the connection between business, other practical areas, and the academic sphere. Most history students who ended up working in business had to connect the dots for themselves, probably with some frustration, and we could mitigate that by helping them along throughout their college careers. We must take the time to make these connections clearer to our students, even if doing so digs into our research time. Why? There is no academy without students. If we don’t address their practical needs, they could fall prey to the danger of the narrowing of their academic curriculum, often due to the demands of misinformed (though well-intentioned) parents.

A 2010 Association of American Colleges and Universities board of directors statement explains that the “narrow training—the kind currently offered in far too many degree and certificate programs—will actually limit human talent and opportunity for better jobs in today’s knowledge economy.”4 The narrow thinker who works, machine-like, off a book’s script makes for an ineffective problem solver—yet another reason to strengthen the reciprocal relationship between corporate needs and academic teachings.

By doing this, we can better equip our students to utilize what we teach them. And if they are asked, “Why bother with a history degree?” they can reply, “Why do you not ask why so many with history degrees are succeeding in a corporate environment?” Academics can teach our students to connect the dots in order to fully demonstrate the transferability of the skills the discipline offers them.

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**Notes**

1. Anthony T. Grafton and Jim ­Grossman, “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History,” *Perspectives on History,* October 2011, [http://www.historians.org/perspectives/­issues/2011/1110/1110pre1.cfm](http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1110/1110pre1.cfm).

2. Anne Hyde, “Advising Mom and Dad: History Majors and Family Worries,” *Perspectives on History,* April 2013, http://www.­historians.org/perspectives/issues/2013/1304/Advising-Mom-and-Dad.cfm#note1.

3. Anthony P. Carnevale, Jeff Strohl, and Michelle Melton, “What’s It Worth?: The Economic Value of College Majors,” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, May 24, 2011, [http://cew.­georgetown.edu/whatsitworth](http://cew.georgetown.edu/whatsitworth).

4. Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning,” 2010, http://www.aacu.org/about/statements/documents/­Quality\_Imperative\_2010.pdf.