

## CAREER COUNSELING FOR THE UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY MAJOR

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Within the last decade the dwindling economic opportunity within academe has forced many Masters and Ph.D. level history graduates to seek careers in previously unexplored areas. Increasing energy and imagination are being expended on the development of "alternative," "non-traditional," or "public history" careers. Most historians involved in non-academic pursuits object to those ascribed labels; yet, the controversy over terminology merely highlights the dimensions of the problems. The employment situation for professional graduate historians, however, is only one aspect of the more encompassing "crisis in history." The diminished status of the discipline within the curriculum of the schools, the decreasing enrollment in upper-division classes, and the declining number of majors also portend a bleak future for the study of history. At least in part, overcoming these ills necessitates vigorous, forthright career counseling for the undergraduate. The job-oriented college student must be made aware of the relationship between major in history and potential careers. Many students enjoy history, but few wish to become historians. The perennial question remains: "I would major in history, but I do not want to teach; what can I do?"

In order to counsel these students effectively each history department needs to establish a mechanism through which it can gather and disseminate information and resources related to employment. This person or committee can collect useful catalogues such as The Directory and Survey of Historical Offices and Programs in the Federal Government;<sup>1</sup> The Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies in the United States and Canada;<sup>2</sup> and the Principal Legislative Staff Offices.<sup>3</sup> The departments can maintain subscriptions to relevant newsletters which carry job notices such as Museum News<sup>4</sup> and Preservation News.<sup>5</sup> Department representatives also can assemble an address list of employment-related agencies such as specific local, state, and national government bureaus, the state employment service, and the regional Federal Job Information Center.

Department graduates can also supply useful information about employment opportunities. By polling the history alumni, data can be assembled concerning where individuals found employment, how they obtained their jobs, and their career patterns. Statistics on employment reveal that over a period of time most people work at a series of jobs, but that they usually remain in the same career area, that is, within a particular industry or type of service. Knowledge thus gleaned can reveal important peculiarities relative to your program and opportunities in your regional job market vis-a-vis national employment trends.

This information should be shared with the career placement service of your college or university. Faculty members generally do not have the time nor the desire to assume the administrative functions of a placement bureau. Far too often, however, especially in a university setting, placement officers are insensitive to the needs of liberal arts majors and are oriented towards providing services to students trained in business or utilitarian skills. Thus, liaison with the placement office can be an important aspect of the advising function since it is that office's responsibility to provide interaction between students and potential employers. Also, in disseminating information to the students, the department might consider holding career seminars. Groups of majors can be advised collectively, or, in conjunction with recruiting, prospective majors can become aware of career opportunities open to them.

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The first task of the advisor is to encourage the student to initiate an interest inventory at an early date. For example, the American College Testing Program (ACT), used by many institutions as part of their enrollment procedure, contains a career planning aid which measures a student's interests and relates them to college majors and to the "world-of-work." After delineating areas of interest, the student must identify related careers, study job descriptions and job projections, and establish personal qualifications (Do I want to work in a particular geographic area? Do I want a job that demands travel?). Hopefully, your school has a counseling center, placement office, or section in its library which collects the books, pamphlets, government studies, etc., which deal with this type of employment information. Since many, if not a majority of students, are uncertain about their career desires, they should keep options open by becoming familiar with several career areas. This is not an easy task; a career search demands much work on the student's part, but it usually pays off in job satisfaction.

Secondly, the advisor needs to make the history major aware of the important occupational skills he or she accumulates. History is not a trade-school subject. While there are a few areas in which it will give a person some advantage, there need not be a direct correlation between specific historical skills and a particular job. If a person wants to become an accountant, she or he must master the craft of bookkeeping. There are, however, thousands of occupations that do not require a command of one unique skill. The history major, as an intelligent, college-trained, liberal arts graduate has acquired many marketable abilities and skills, including a social awareness of the world and a knowledge of the intricacies of human relationships. In addition he possesses the ability to communicate effectively in both oral and written form; to research extensively and thoroughly, and to solve problems. Prospective employers from business and government weigh those general attributes heavily. A vast array of employers are looking for intelligent, articulate, mature, motivated individuals who can adapt to their corporation or agency and learn their system. A job interview is filled with general questions aimed at evaluating an applicant's personal habits and attitudes and their overall social awareness and intelligence. The most frequently mentioned negative factors leading to the rejection of a job candidate include the lack of proper personal appearance, clear expression, tact, maturity, courtesy, toleration, stable relations with parents and friends, and social understanding.

Similarly, personnel interviewers stress the importance of participation in school activities, work experience, advanced planning for a career (general sense of purpose and goals), and knowledge of their particular corporation or agency. First, this illustrates the significance of motivating the students to begin their career search well before they become graduating seniors. Secondly, participation in school activities and/or work experience are valuable for experience as well as sources for letters of recommendation. Obviously, the active student demonstrates concern, interest, responsibility, and leadership. In part-time and/or temporary summer employment the person learns important skills for a work-a-day world. The successful employee can also secure a testimonial or two extolling his or her abilities. The student that does his career homework first should not merely seek a job, but should try to find employment in an area of interest. Pre-med students work in clinics and hospitals; law students clerk; a history major who has delineated career goals can also seek a job in a related field such as law, government, or journalism. To reiterate, it is not a simple task. The faculty member can advise, but only the student can do the tedious, time-consuming preparation and search.

Despite the earlier disclaimer, a brief note must be added on the traditional field of teaching which continues to draw majors to history at many colleges. Advising in this area remains difficult and the student must

constantly keep abreast of employment projections. Demographic figures continue to forecast limited opportunities, especially in large urban and suburban systems. Those extraordinarily dedicated to the profession, however, can increase their chances by becoming qualified to teach more than one subject or by adding extracurricular skills such as coaching, drivers' education, or journalism. Another option is the desire or willingness to teach in small-town and rural areas. Persons inclined to work in that geographic setting will find a somewhat brighter picture. Furthermore, students should not overlook the area of educational administration. At the college level, for example, the offices of student personnel, admissions, financial aid, public relations, and development frequently hire generally trained liberal arts graduates.

Similarly, the counselor needs to draw the relationship between a major in history and entrance into the professional schools. History provides excellent preparation for law school, and medicine and dentistry require proficiency in only a few basic sciences. In 1979, for example, forty-six percent of the history majors that applied to medical schools (313) were accepted. Realistically, one must be aware of the science bias of medical school entrance committees, but also be aware of the fact that history majors can and do go on to become physicians. Likewise, entrance into a Masters of Business Administration program only requires several foundation courses such as basic economics, accounting, and management. All or most of the course work can be obtained while completing the BA in history or later while the person pursues the MBA degree.

The advisor's major thrust, however, should be to make the student aware of careers outside academe. Historical administration is an expanding area, although by no means is it a boom industry. Yet, hundreds of jobs annually are available in archival work, museology, historical preservation, and historical editing. Over 70% of the people employed in museums, for example, hold a BA degree or less. One needs to research the kinds of employment available and to differentiate among the volunteer jobs, the temporary appointments, the menial positions, and the professional-level careers. Each of the fields publishes a newsletter which carries employment information, and catalogues such as the Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies in the United States and Canada list potential employers.

Employment with the government is a second large area for history majors. Some jobs are directly history-related such as at historical sites, at national parks, in historical offices of certain agencies, or with some personal or legislative staff. Some jobs are patronage appointments which necessitate prior political involvement on the part of the applicant. Most jobs, however, are under the jurisdiction of the civil service system and, significantly, most of them are not directly history-related. The myriad of positions involve administrative functions which do not require a specialization in any single discipline. The Complete Guide to Civil Service is an invaluable tool to a person interested in the field and the Federal Job Information Center lists current open positions. Applicants must take the Professional and Administrative Careers Examination (PACE) which is held twice a year at irregular intervals. A bachelors degree is a minimum requirement, but students may take the test nine months prior to graduation. A sign-up deadline, usually four to six weeks prior to the exam, also exists. The timetable merely reemphasizes the need for advanced planning. A student cannot begin a job search the day after commencement (that day is not a beginning in terms of securing employment).

State government hiring practices usually differ slightly one from another depending upon the source of funding. Like the federal government, however, states use a form of merit system testing and your state personnel

department and state employment service list current openings. City governments may not administer standardized examinations; instead they may give individual tests for specific positions. Again, their jobs are likely to be advertised through the state employment service, and the same concern for sign-up and testing schedules pertains to these levels of government.

The business sector also provides a host of opportunities for history majors. Careers abound in communications, public relations, and publishing which entail researching, editing, writing, and sales. History graduates can also garner places in banking, management training programs, travel agencies, general sales, and as account representatives and office administrators. Recent Creighton history graduates, for example, found employment as a sports complex manager, a hotel reservations manager, a bond salesman for a stock firm, an account representative for the telephone company, a feature writer for a newspaper, an editor of a newsletter for a local non-profit corporation, a business machines account representative, an agricultural machinery salesman, a land purchaser for a coal company, and a bank management trainee. Little or no direct correlation existed between specific historical skills and those careers. As a college graduate who happened to like history and major in it, however, they possessed the general organizational and communicational proficiency required for those positions. The history major should realize that he or she must market personality, general intelligence, social awareness, and articulateness, and display a desire and aptitude to learn the system of a particular position and corporation.

College is expensive and a meaningful career is the goal of almost every student. The liberal arts in general, history specifically, provide few directly related career opportunities. If the discipline wishes to continue to attract majors in any sizeable number, departments must assume a career counseling function. The realities of the market place prevent students from pursuing a general education unrelated to future economic security. Therefore, in departmental self-interest and as an ethical responsibility (does anyone really wish to recruit majors for the unemployment line?) departments need to offer occupational advising. This does not mean that faculty members must become placement officers. The point is that most students think about employment in direct relational terms--study accounting, become an accountant; study management, become a manager; study history, become a teacher! The advisor must break that cycle, make the students aware of the options, and get them to begin the career search early. Then, the responsibility for finding a meaningful career lies with the student.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, 400 A Street, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

<sup>2</sup>American Association for State and Local History, 1400 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee 37203.

<sup>3</sup>The Council of State Governments, P.O. Box 11910, Iron Works Pike, Lexington, Kentucky 40511.

<sup>4</sup>American Association of Museums, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

<sup>5</sup>Education Services Division, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 740-748 Jackson Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.