

APPLIED HISTORY AT THOMAS MORE COLLEGE

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"Education is important, but
so is employability."¹

The above quote from Nation's Business raises a controversial issue often thought about by individual professors at colleges and universities across America but rarely if ever discussed in polite circles. With Richard Kirkendall's now-well-known mid-1970s study about "The State of History in the Schools" as a catalyst, historians would be well advised to address themselves forcefully and creatively to the very problem implied in this apparently simple statement.² As a sign that many have, public history programs have developed and are continuing to emerge across the country.

One of the best known of these programs nationally is that in "Applied History and Social Sciences" at Carnegie-Mellon University. This program: (1) "allows participants to maintain and focus historical interests toward a rich array of employment possibilities, largely outside the conventional academic sphere, while adding the important skills from other disciplines;" (2) "is designed to produce analysts who can use historical reasoning and materials in conjunction with sophisticated social science research tools;" and (3) "explores ways to use historical perspectives and methods to grapple with contemporary social problems."³

It is the latter two goals, of course, that distinguish Carnegie-Mellon, Harvard, and the other forerunner in the field, the University of California at Santa Barbara, from the rest of the country. But the first goal is especially worth emphasizing here because it allows a comparison even to the "Applied History" program at Thomas More College, a four-year liberal arts institution of 900 or so full-time students located just south of the Ohio River near Cincinnati in Northern Kentucky. As a community-based, largely-commuter college that prides itself on a "personalized" approach to education, a significant part of our mission is to support "unified preparation for life," emphasizing "provision for a fruitful career." One of the ways this is done is through strong institutional support for its nationally-recognized cooperative education program that attracts some 50% of all upper-division students at the college. The approach, interestingly enough, is one that was mirrored in the Nation's Business argument that "Education is important, but so is employability."

As an active participant in that co-op program, the Thomas More College History Department offers our majors a wide-ranging set of internship and cooperative education opportunities that serve students' needs by providing them with the experience that so many employers are seeking when they interview college seniors. Pre-law students, for example, while still undergraduates, can work as co-ops in one of Cincinnati's top five law firms or as pre-trial interns with the Kentucky Pre-trial Release Agency. Other students have interned (not paid) or co-oped (paid) in any of a number of local offices of politicians, including U.S. Senators such as Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio and Wendell Ford and Walter Huddleston of Kentucky; U.S. Representatives such as Thomas Luken and William Gradison of Ohio; and the Mayors of Cincinnati and Covington. Some students have chosen to go to Washington, D.C. or Frankfort, Kentucky. Other opportunities have developed at the Cincinnati Historical Society (microfilming, manuscripts, or as assistant to the Director of Education), the Kenton County (Kentucky) Public Library, the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Covington (Kentucky) Diocesan Archives, and the Behringer-Crawford Museum of Natural and Cultural History.

Among the many other history students (such as those with double majors in Business Administration or Accounting), some have co-oped in the banking industry (Central Trust Bank Corporation in Cincinnati and Covington Trust in Covington), at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, and at the local branches of several major retail stores. Since some 70% of the college's students have part-time jobs anyway, a concerted effort is made to place them in positions related to their chosen field and interests.

But, while we may come close to finding positions for all interested history/pre-law majors, we still attempt to address the problems and interests of the other students. The second feature of our "Applied History" program is a special one-credit, semester-long course, taught every other year and required for all history majors. It meets on alternate Wednesday evenings during the fall for seven class sessions. The unique feature of the course is that it utilizes heavily one of our best local resources: carefully-maintained alumni contacts. Of approximately 400 Thomas More College (since 1968--formerly Villa Madonna College back to 1928) history graduates, about 350 still reside in the Cincinnati metropolitan area. Since 1976, through the vehicle of annual History Homecoming Banquets and an active History Alumni Council, made up of the four full-time history faculty and nine alumni, it is now the rare individual that does not receive at least 2 or 3 mailings from us each year. The result is a series of social occasions often honoring former faculty, current faculty, special alumni, or our Phi Alpha Theta Chapter, an occasional History Department Newsletter, and the all-important Applied History course that is carefully planned 6-12 months ahead of time. Described below, for example, is the schedule for the fall, 1982, semester. The course, described in the College catalog as "a survey of available careers in History by practitioners in the profession," is one way that we strive to demonstrate to students and the community alike that not only is education obtained from textbooks and through classroom theory, but the learning that results is more special because it is now more appreciated than ever before as being useful in a career. The specific objectives for the course, meanwhile, are as follows: (1) to show the student the value of a history background for a variety of careers, even those not history-related; (2) to introduce the student to various careers in which history majors have been successful; (3) to acquaint the student with persons (and alumni, in particular) who have found their history major beneficial and who may be in a position to help the new graduate in his chosen career; (4) to inform the student about the GMAT, LSAT, GRE, PACE, Millers Analogies, and many other examinations often required for admission to employment or advanced study; (5) to provide the student with basic information about the organization and value of a good resume and offer ideas on "how to prepare for an interview."

Moving to the projected schedule for a moment, let me indicate some of the highlights of the course. The opening class--with a theme of "History: But What Can I Do With It?"--is designed to provide the students with a wealth of information about "Careers for Historians" and "Career Testing." The students also hear a successful "public historian" address the theme and, in the process, share any experiences he might deem relevant. The basic idea for this opening session emerged from a March, 1980, paper presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference by Dennis Mihelich of Creighton University. His list of addresses, for example, was invaluable for obtaining a large collection of relevant materials. That paper, later published as "Career Counseling for the Undergraduate History Major" in the Spring, 1981, issue of Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, particularly his home when it concluded:

If the discipline [History] 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.

In short, Mihelich is not saying that we must become placement officers but is reminding those of us who teach that it is our duty to make students aware of the options.⁴

The next series of classes are then related to specific career categories: Education (#2), Law (#3), Business (#4), and Government (#5). Session #2 opens with a keynote speaker, James Fouche, Chairman of the Department of Education at Northern Kentucky University and a Past-President of the Kentucky Council for the Social Studies, who addresses the issue of "History Majors and Education as a Future." A panel of teachers representing all levels of education are then asked to comment on Fouche's observations. A third team of coordinators (law) opts instead for direct comments from a pre-selected panel made up of a judge, four lawyers with different kinds of specialties and responsibilities, and a paralegal. Among the questions offered to each panelist are: "What undergraduate courses or even minor would you recommend in addition to history as a major?" and "What skills are important for a career in law?" Class #4 (business) has a theme of "Business and Industry: What Would They Want With You, A History Major?" and, this time, combines a featured speaker from Washington, D.C., on "History and Legal Publishing" with an overview on the job market in our nation's capital as well as a team of panelists, representing a wide spectrum of the business world, who will share insights on "How history as an undergraduate major affected their career development!" The fifth session (government) returns to the straight panel format, but with more time planned for a follow-up open forum. Any combination of six questions are answered by each panelist (e.g., "How can some of the skills of history, such as analysis, synthesis and effective communications, be helpful to a career in government?") and then the audience's questions or comments are integrated into the discussion. Local, state, and federal officials are included among the panelists.

The final two sessions, meanwhile, are set up in a different fashion and with a different purpose. "Living with History," which addresses the use of history as entertainment and relaxation, is intended merely to show that history can also be fun. Covered are the fascinating aspects of such jobs or avocations as museum work and archaeological digs, local history, travel, house renovation, photography, military miniatures, and "steamboat mania." The last time around, an alumna who was the curator of America's only ventriloquist's museum (Vent Haven) was also on the panel. The final session, which culminates with a social hour for all of the course's participants, is also more informal. It features a team of "recent graduates" who share the trials, tribulations, and joys of their first year or two out in the real world. One young lady, for example, only two months after graduation lost a job she had worked towards for four years with Federated Department Stores (and, therefore, had not taken advantage of other internship or co-op opportunities while in school.) She spoke to the class after nine months of unemployment and described some rough experiences and deep-felt emotions. These recent graduates were well known by the students and certainly could relate to immediate occurrences to answer such questions as: "Has your History background been a help or a hindrance in obtaining and in performing your present job? (and why?); What advice would you offer current History students?"

Reflecting back and yet anticipating the next edition of the course, we still can feel good about the student reactions to the experiences in recent semesters. While the comments on weekly evaluations were especially helpful for bringing about many improvements, the following comments are typical of the overall satisfaction even then:

1. The course was very helpful in opening my eyes about the wide-ranging careers that History as a background can prepare one for . . . I never thought, for example, that a History major could end up as President of a bank, co-owner of an oil company or Director of Data Processing for a major firm, such as Cincinnati Bell.
2. The course helped me realize what getting into the job market in the future is all about and, as a result, gives us an edge over most A.B. graduates by introducing us to many things never heard before so we can plan accordingly while there is still time . . . such a course should always be a part of the History program.
3. Above all the course gave me a broader understanding of and appreciation for the many skills I had the opportunity to develop during my History studies that I should be proud of: research tactics, analytical skills, and organizational skills, writing ability and the self-confidence that comes with being able to think on your feet . . . It was nice to see what having these can lead you to.
4. One comment on the entire course that seemed to be the opinion of each of the speakers is that History as a Major broadens one's outlook on life--more so than any other Major is apparently capable of. I am certainly more convinced than ever that one does not have to apologize for having been a History Major.

In the final analysis, then, while our program is clearly adapted to our needs, goals, market area, and above all special resources (around 50 separate alumni participate in the course each time it is offered), we see our narrow version of public history fitting squarely into the national movement. In short, we emphasize early and strongly to our students (and just about anybody else who will listen) how important it is "to maintain and focus historical interests toward a rich array of employment possibilities."

Actually, referring even further back, two major observations had an enormous impact on me and prompted my commitment to "Applied History." Pioneer Robert Kelley said, in his often-quoted article "Public History, The Current Situation:"

I believe that the first thing we have learned is that we are emerging out of the formless confusion that surrounded our first uncertain efforts during the past few years to think about what historians can do in society besides serving as teachers: what larger role the historical method can play, and how to objectify the new concept in more forms of training, new career outlets, and perhaps even in new structures of national organization.⁵

And, equally as influential were the insights of David A. Clary in his essay, "Training Employable Historians." Talking about how historians are needed "in many walks of life," Clary reminded us all that:

The traditional emphasis in history education upon clear and correct writing is an essential ingredient of the historian's preparation for life, no matter his choice of career. We are the last scholarly discipline that still communicates in English--all others having adopted arcane jargons, sometimes as substitutes for substantive expression. An ability to formulate and clearly express ideas can give the historian a great deal of influence in the world of affairs where the authority of professionals depends more on the ability to persuade managers than on the exercise of power.⁶

We at Thomas More College are proof, I hope, that "Public History" as the "professional practice of history for public service" need not be restricted to large universities nor to graduate students. If history is to survive as the viable undergraduate major that we all know it must be, we must not be allowed to forget that "history is still in a crisis." Dexter Perkins warned us many years ago in his presidential address to the American Historical Association and, more recently, in 1975, Richard Kirkendall made this observation:

Doubts about history's usefulness for the individual and for society now exert a large influence on attitudes and decisions. These are facts that must be recognized and faced by members of the profession and solutions must be developed.

Public History as a movement, in our estimation, is a perfect example of what Kirkendall is referring to later when he actually demands "imagination and innovation by historians."⁷ And we are proud of the effective if small part we have been able to play in it. That we have been successful, I might add, is probably most visibly expressed by the absence of a single history major during the last three years who has frustratingly found the need to ask:

Of what value is a history major as a preparation for life?
What can I do with it besides teach?

"Public History" can therefore be said to have found a permanent home at Thomas More College.

NOTES

¹"Campus/Job: Shuttles to Careers," Nation's Business (December, 1981), 66.

²Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," Journal of American History, LXV (September, 1975), 557-570.

³Carnegie-Mellon University, "Graduate Program in Applied History and Social Science: New Opportunities in History" (brochure).

⁴Dennis Mihelich, "Career Counseling for the Undergraduate History Major," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, VI (Spring, 1981), 11-14.

⁵Robert Kelley, "Public History: The Current Situation." First used at Second Annual Conference on Public History (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), "Public and Applied History and its Relation to the Historical Profession" (April 18, 1980).

⁶David A. Clary, "Write When You Find Work: Advice for Graduate Faculty on Training Employable Historians," The History Teacher, XII (November, 1978), 65-85.

⁷Kirkendall, 569-570.