

WHAT TO DO WITH A DEGREE IN HISTORY?

Alan Gordon
Associate Professor of History
University of Guelph

In today's competitive employment environment, students often hear well meaning advice to shun their interests and pursue so-called "practical" studies. Parents, guidance counsellors, and teachers often steer undergraduate students to degree programs leading to clearly defined jobs in such fields as engineering, medicine, and computer applications. Yet, according to the 2001 Canadian census, graduates with History degrees were more likely to be employed than graduates with degrees in political science, biochemistry, general engineering, and computer science. Moreover, average salaries for History graduates were about 25% above the general average for workers with post-secondary education.¹

Clearly, majoring in History can lead to a successful career. A small number of History students go on to pursue careers in education (primary, secondary or university teaching), but most graduates find the skills and knowledge that they acquired studying History serve them well in many different positions. The skill sets one learns in university History courses are readily transferable to a wide variety of career options. Almost any job that involves information processing, research, critical reasoning, selecting and evaluating evidence, handling ambiguities, considering long term effects, and communicating complex ideas in an effective and persuasive manner, can draw on the skills learned in a History program.

Personal experience bears out this generalization. I have studied with people who used their History degrees to find employment as foreign aid workers and publisher representatives. Some have found jobs as lawyers, public historians, and policy researchers for Health Canada and the Department of Indian Affairs. Others are newspaper and magazine editors and working for the National Film Board. And, of course, some are History professors. These are not hypothetical examples. These are all real jobs held by History graduates. Graduates from the University of Guelph have found employment as university presidents, Canadian ambassadors to foreign countries, directors of major museums, ministers of various faiths, managing editors of major publishing houses, lawyers - the list goes on. You should consider your options carefully, but rest assured that History graduates find meaningful employment in a wide variety of areas. The following list is not exhaustive, but highlights some common career routes followed by History students.

¹Statistics Canada, *2001 Census of Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003), catalogue number 97F0018XCB2001040 and catalogue number 97F0018XCB2001043 (available at <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/standard/themes/DataProducts.cfm?S=1&T=52&ALEVEL=2&FREE=0>)

the social services or in policy analysis), staffing public agencies, the diplomatic corps, or aiding public officials. It could also involve working on political campaigns, doing constituent services, or holding an appointed or elected public office. Working as a unpaid intern or volunteer can also help get a start, but for some positions graduate degrees in History (MA or PhD) are necessary for career advancement. Certainly advanced degrees in public administration, policy studies, or law help, and are sometimes necessary for specific positions. Undergraduate studies in History offer excellent preparation for these degrees. Some positions are more directly related to historical studies. For instance both the Department of National Defence and Foreign Affairs employ historians. For these types of positions advanced degrees in History are usually essential.

5. Non-Governmental Organizations: NGOs are organizations that operate alongside governments, both internationally and within Canada. This is a category that includes a wide range of non-profit groups and institutions. NGOs typically work in areas such as international aid and development or rural and urban development. Other possibilities include peacekeeping, immigrant support, public health, the environment, community development, social services, and so on. History offers the critical reasoning and communications skills, as well as the method of understanding social problems, these organizations value. A solid command of a second or third language is usually helpful in finding work in these areas. In many cases, volunteering or internship positions offer the best start towards full time, paid employment with NGOs. You will not get rich following this career path; instead, dedication to a cause is often the motivation for this kind of work. Nevertheless, a successful and well paid career is possible in this sector.

6. Law: History is an obvious step towards a career in law as it offers the kind of research training law schools value. Once completing your B.A. (with a Major in History), the next step is obviously to go to law school. Some suggest work as a paralegal, law clerk, or legal secretary can help, but for admission to law school solid grades and strong LSAT scores are imperative. Many History courses teach exactly the kinds of writing and reasoning skills that lawyers find essential to their work and that are tested on the LSATs. Lawyers sometimes specialize (such as in business law, family law, criminal law, and constitutional law, among others) and job prospects are better in some fields than in others, but generally lawyers enjoy excellent job prospects.

7. Public History, Museums, Libraries, and Archives: An undergraduate degree in History opens the door to careers in these fields. However, advanced degrees in library science or museum studies, as well as History or Public History (a separate discipline), can enhance your career potential. Volunteer work and internships can also be very helpful in getting a start. In museum work, curatorial positions seem obvious, but museum directors and even developers and fundraisers find a historical background indispensable to their work. Recently some private historical research companies have emerged to offer “outsourced” support to public institutions, such as government departments. This offers a new career option for History graduates. Ottawa-based Public History, Inc (www.publichistory.ca) is only one such example.

8. Education

8a. Primary and Secondary School Teaching: For those looking for a career as a teacher, majoring in History is excellent preparation for teaching Social Studies or History in primary or secondary schools. For the public and separate school systems in Ontario, teacher certification through a Bachelor of Education degree is a basic requirement that can be obtained at Canadian or foreign schools. However, as education in Canada is provincially controlled, you should check individual provincial regulations. Private schools often have more flexibility about hiring practices and therefore follow their own standards and criteria. For those who qualify, the job outlook in teaching is likely to be quite strong. Beyond a B.A., a Master's degree in History can greatly strengthen one's job prospects and is usually a prerequisite to senior or administrative positions in the school system.

8b. Scholarship and University Teaching: Obviously a degree in History is essential for becoming a History professor. After finishing a B.A. (with a minimum B+ average in History), the next steps are to go to graduate school, earning first a Master's degree (M.A.) and then a Ph.D. in History. A Master's degree usually involves a commitment of one or two years. A Ph.D. typically takes between four and seven years. In Canada, most students follow this pattern, often but not always obtaining their M.A. and Ph.D. at different schools. In the United States, it is possible to skip the M.A. or obtain a combined M.A./Ph.D. One should have an exceptional undergraduate record to pursue this option coming from a Canadian undergraduate degree. The process in other parts of the world varies by country. If pursuing graduate studies in History interests you, it is best to consult with your professors as early in your undergraduate career as possible. They can help you identify what courses are best to take, what language and other skills are needed, advise you on developing a strong application package, as well as offer you advice from their personal experiences. Scholarships and other forms of financial support are often available for graduate students, but if you are interested in a career as an academic, you should be ready to live on a moderate income for a relatively long period. The job prospects for those who complete the Ph.D. are improving, but this is a career option only for those who love History, excel in their History courses, and feel they have something meaningful and important to contribute to historical knowledge. If this meets your view of yourself, an academic career can be a fulfilling choice that offers an unrivalled opportunity to pursue your personal interests.

History graduates should exploit their advantage of a broad general knowledge and a useful way of examining problems. History is an inclusive discipline with a wide range of specialist sub-fields: social, political, cultural, economic, intellectual, and religious histories are only a few. History combines well with other subjects in the humanities, and reinforces advanced degrees in a wide variety of areas. Whatever kind of employment you pursue, you should highlight the transferable skills you developed in your History courses, including understanding of and experience in research methodology, information management, critical thinking and analysis, oral and written communications, the ability to meet deadlines and work independently.