

History isn't a 'useless' major. It teaches critical thinking, something America needs plenty more of — LA Times Opinion / May 30, 2016 by James Grossman, Executive Director of the American Historical Association

Since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2007, the history major has lost significant market share in academia, declining from 2.2% of all undergraduate degrees to 1.7%. The graduating class of 2014, the most recent for which there are national data, included 9% fewer history majors than the previous year's cohort, compounding a 2.8% decrease the year before that. The drop is most pronounced at large research universities and prestigious liberal arts colleges. This is unfortunate — not just for those colleges, but for our economy and polity. Of course it's not just history. Students also are slighting other humanities disciplines including philosophy, literature, linguistics and languages. Overall, the core humanities disciplines constituted only 6.1% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in 2014, the lowest proportion since systematic data collection on college majors began in 1948. Conventional wisdom offers its usual facile answers for these trends: Students (sometimes pressured by parents paying the tuition) choose fields more likely to yield high-paying employment right after graduation — something "useful," like business (19% of diplomas), or technology-oriented. History looks like a bad bet.

Politicians both draw on those simplicities and perpetuate them — from President Barack Obama's dig against the value of an art history degree to Sen. Marco Rubio's comment that welders earn more than philosophers. Governors oppose public spending on "useless" college majors. History, like its humanistic brethren, might prepare our young people to be citizens, but it supposedly does not prepare workers — at least not well paid ones. The diminished prospects for attorneys in recent years extends this logic, as the history major has long been considered among the best preparation for law school. The other conventional career path for history majors is teaching, but that too is suffering weak demand due to pressure on public school budgets.

A historian, however, would know that it is essential to look beyond such simplistic logic. Yes, in the first few years after graduation, STEM and business majors have more obvious job prospects — especially in engineering and computer science. And in our recession-scarred economic context, of course students are concerned with landing that first job. Over the long run, however, graduates in history and other humanities disciplines do well financially. Rubio would be surprised to learn that after 15 years, those philosophy majors have more lucrative careers than college graduates with business degrees. History majors' mid-career salaries are on par with those holding business bachelor's degrees. Notably these salary findings exclude those who went on to attain a law or other graduate degree.

The utility of disciplines that prepare critical thinkers escapes personnel offices, pundits and politicians (some of whom perhaps would prefer that colleges graduate more followers and fewer leaders). But it shouldn't. Labor markets in the United States and other countries are unstable and unpredictable. In this environment — especially given the expectation of career changes — the most useful degrees are those that can open multiple doors, and those that prepare one to learn rather than do some specific thing. All liberal arts degrees demand that kind of learning, as well as the oft-invoked virtues of critical thinking and clear communication skills. History students, in particular, sift through substantial amounts of information, organize it, and make sense of it. In the process they learn how to infer what drives and motivates human behavior from elections to social movements to board rooms. Employers interested in recruiting future managers should understand (and many do) that historical thinking prepares one for leadership because history is about change — envisioning it, planning for it, making it last. In an election season we are reminded regularly that success often goes to whoever can articulate the most compelling narrative. History majors learn to do that.

Everything has a history. To think historically is to recognize that all problems, all situations, all institutions exist in contexts that must be understood before informed decisions can be made. No entity — corporate, government, nonprofit — can afford not to have a historian at the table. We need more history majors, not fewer.

Questions to answer & prepare for discussion:

1. What is the author's thesis, his main idea?
2. What is the context of this article? What is happening that spurred him to write it? Why now?
3. Who is his intended audience? Why them?
4. What is the article's purpose?
5. What is the author's point of view? Why does THIS person take this position?
6. How will knowing this information impact you in this class?