

ADVICE

The ROI of a History Degree

How to direct history students toward fulfilling nonacademic careers, and make the case for the value of the field.

By Patryk J. Babiracki and James W. Cortada

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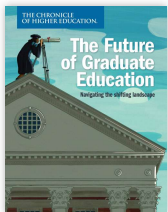
A sense of urgency can be felt around the hallways of liberal-arts departments: We have less money, fewer students, and more pressure to justify what we do. The future of the humanities seems uncertain, and a future without the humanities seems frightening yet all too imaginable in the face of political attacks and program cuts.

History faculty members share the sense of impending doom: “It’s the end of history,” an [essayist recently warned](#) in *The New York Times*, “and the consequences will be significant.” We’ve responded by updating curricula, jazzing up our course titles (from “Medieval History” to “Knights and Monsters”), and teaching about the historical aspects of present-day concerns such as technology, the environment, or social equity. Likewise, for more than a decade, we’ve had energetic conversations about how to [better prepare](#) our doctoral students for nonacademic career options.

But have we done enough to help majors and graduate students grasp the full range of career options available to them with a history degree? Clearly not. As historians whose careers and focus have bridged the gap between higher education and the business world (one of us was an IBM executive and the other [hosts a podcast](#) on the practical uses of history, especially in business and tech), we suggest three steps that academics and administrators could take to build the case. More specifically, these steps would help students find fulfilling careers in the kind of well-paying domains — business and tech — that rarely feature prominently in our history-career conversations.

Step 1: Identify and spotlight your discipline’s “superpowers.” Employers are looking for skills. All of the humanities share a commitment to critical inquiry into the human condition, but the angles, methods, and types of insights of various disciplines don’t overlap neatly. Every field, including history, is unique in the range of skills that you acquire by studying it. Disciplines like anthropology have been successful in forging links with the private sector — in part, because its advocates have made clear how human-centric research methodologies (such as ethnographic observation) influence product design and user experience in tech, consulting, finance, and other industries.

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The question for historians is: How can we mobilize the unique superpowers of history graduates to succeed on the job market? Now is the time to think about the applicability of history to business and other labor sectors that offer competitive

salaries and a wide range of jobs, both of which are of major concern to prospective students who wonder about the ROI on a history degree.

Companies globally are facing a dual challenge: the rapidly changing nature of work and the inadequate access to sufficiently trained employees. With artificial intelligence becoming more and more sophisticated, companies are moving to automate data processing and other tasks previously carried out by humans. Employers want to hire people who can do things that AI systems can't (or at least not very well) — such as form judgments, think critically and creatively, navigate ambiguity and layered contexts, manage complicated projects, appreciate various perspectives, communicate effectively, and show empathy. Those skills are key to the future of work, but they are in short supply, forcing employers to plan large-scale efforts to improve the skills of their workers.

History can help fill that gap. Our majors, M.A.s, and Ph.D.s learn how to think about change over time, do research on people and ideas, interpret data, analyze action scenarios, absorb constructive feedback, adjust to new information, and communicate ideas and hypotheses to various audiences, including those on social media. Our students develop these diverse and sought-after skills throughout their training in addition to acquiring historical knowledge and geographic or thematic expertise.

In short, students with a bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D. in history are well-positioned to help companies deal with growth strategy, business management, intercultural communication, consumer behavior, sales, and human resources.

Data show that a small but growing number of history Ph.D.s is already doing such work. According to [existing \(and tentative\) data](#) from the American Historical Association, nearly 7 percent of people who earned Ph.D.s in history at U.S. universities from 2004-13 went on to work in the private sector, compared with about 8.5 percent in 2014-17. The [most recent](#) national Survey of Earned Doctorates found

an increasing proportion of doctoral recipients across all fields are taking industry jobs. That held true even in the humanities, where 10.8 percent of Ph.D.s worked in industry in 2022, compared with only 3.7 percent in 1992.

In history, our Ph.D.s and M.A.s are already doing industry work, for example, as corporate historians, applying their skills to maintain company archives, write company histories, and also select and evaluate marketing content, help organize anniversaries, consult with crafting corporate messaging, curate company museums, and help shape the corporate brand. Some of our students go into historical consulting and work with governments and private clients. Their projects span issues as diverse as cultural heritage, ecological preservation, water rights, organizational management, brand strategy, corporate exhibitions, company histories, and family histories.

Still, the full value of a history degree for careers outside of higher ed is not always clear. And it's on history departments and institutions to highlight for employers the superpowers of our bachelor's, master's, and doctoral graduates as prospective staff members, researchers, analysts, strategists, and communication specialists.

Step 2: Get more tactical in linking your students to good jobs. We often tell students that good writing is about showing, rather than telling. We should inspire academic and business leaders to work together on connecting students with nonacademic careers. Promote concrete examples, both of history graduates who have built careers in business and of business challenges that benefited from the application of historical methods, concepts, and skills. Demonstrate for prospective and current history students that the breadth of options is vast. Offer a balanced picture of business and industry careers — the positives, too, and not just the negatives.

College administrators should take the lead in bringing together humanities departments and business leaders in a collective effort to promote career options and support it financially. But within that broad effort, each department would have a vital

and particular role to play. History departments know the needs of our students and can engage with alumni networks more effectively than a large organization. Students look back fondly at their alma mater, but their strongest lifelong bonds often remain with the specific departments and disciplines.

The idea of “applied history” is an initial step in that direction. The premise is that historical knowledge can help formulate insights for present-day challenges. Most applied-history programs tend to deal with social and political issues (an example would be Harvard’s [Applied History Project](#), inspired by the pioneering 1986 book, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History For Decision Makers*).

But there is wider potential. Since business leaders grow and learn, company culture evolves, and customer preferences shift constantly, analyzing change over time — as historians are trained to do — is relevant to key strategic issues within industries. Here are a few ways to be more strategic in connecting your students with careers paths:

- Chairs and deans should reach out to local and national businesses and create opportunities for their people to get to know our people, and learn about each other’s needs and strengths. This could be done through networking events, presentations, conferences, and data collection (on alumni careers and on views about the future of work).
- Colleges, history departments, and companies should collaborate on creating curricula that help students apply historical methodologies to concrete business challenges. Start by cross-listing courses between traditionally isolated departments, such as history and business. Encourage history students to minor in fields such as business administration or environmental studies, particularly if the minor is related to the subject of the student’s thesis or dissertation.
- Make sure the exchanges go in both directions. Feature business case studies in courses on applied history. Business courses can engage more intentionally with historical concepts and method, through centers for applied humanities, applied history minors, and certifications that combine history and professional training

in “hard” skills (e.g., accounting, finance, design, or ability to use specialized software) that are both valued and immediately recognized by employers.

- Create certifications and credentialing systems that students in history (and other humanities fields) could use to pursue careers in tech, marketing, communications, finance, consulting, human resources, and other industries where historians’ transferable skills are increasingly valuable. Some institutions, primarily in technical fields, have created successful certification programs, but the same approach could be adopted by the humanities and history in particular to enhance students’ career preparation. These credentials have the added value of promoting equity by recognizing all types of learning and by giving students more flexibility in moving through the program.
- Conversely, companies and colleges should partner to help nonacademic leaders appreciate the value of the humanities through curricula in which history plays an important role. A 2023 example of such a program is Virginia Tech’s [Institute for Leaders in Technology](#), a “one-year, low-residency fellowship” for mid-career professionals who earn an executive-leadership credential that is “grounded in the liberal arts.” The institute was led by Rishi Jaitly, who earned his undergraduate degree in history from Princeton University and credits history and the humanities for enriching his perspectives on technology.
- Institutions could also collaborate with public organizations and private companies to create internships, fellowships, and mentorship programs. Such efforts would help students on all levels learn about industry-specific roles, work cycles, industry-specific languages, and career paths, and help them consolidate networks of peers and mentors. And they would help companies identify good candidates for permanent hiring opportunities.

Step 3: Be open to the value of “practical” history. This may be the hardest challenge for those academics who consider the sole mission of the historical curriculum to be idealistic pursuit of historical truth. Should practical history replace that mission? Of course not. But it does have great potential to complement our course offerings, make

the discipline more attractive to a broader mix of students, and sustain history education in the long run.

History as a professional discipline developed in response to the Enlightenment's call to arms for a systematic exploration of the universe. But it flourished under the aegis of 19th-century nation states that relied on historians to consolidate ideas about nations and peoples in order to justify their power. We need not sympathize with all premises of 19th-century historiography to appreciate the fact that state building helped our discipline to evolve, to make an impact on such areas as international diplomacy, and to become central to the liberal-arts curriculum.

Today, businesses are increasingly expected to be socially responsible, and many of them are improving people's lives. They might be our natural partners in the effort to revive interest in history and the humanities.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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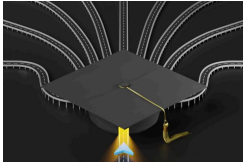
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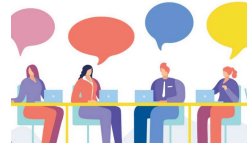
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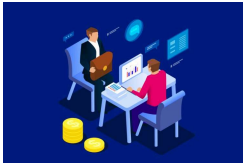
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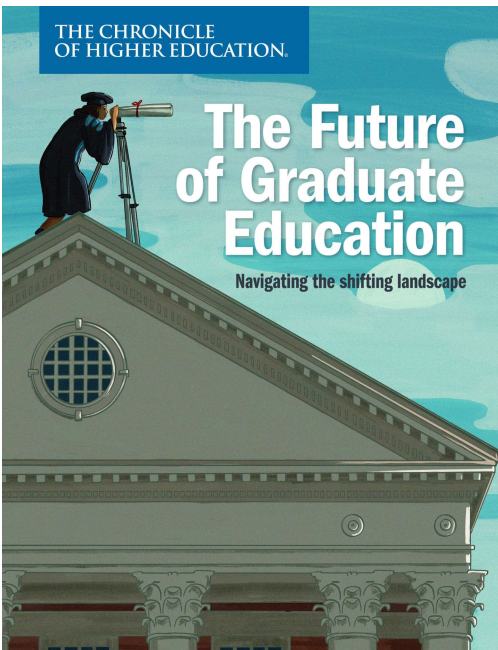


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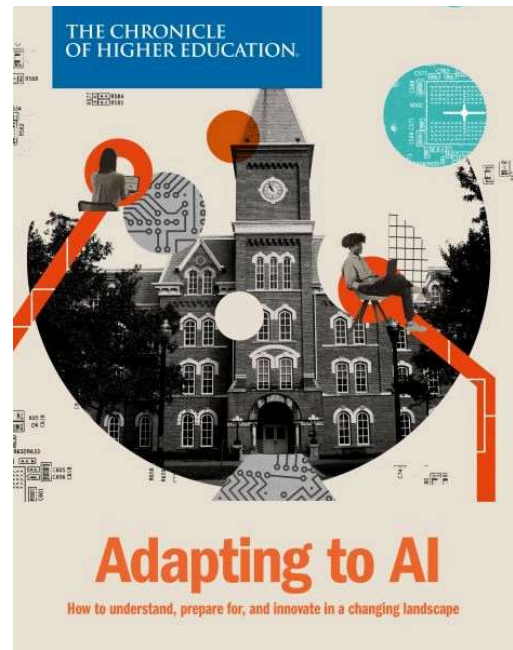


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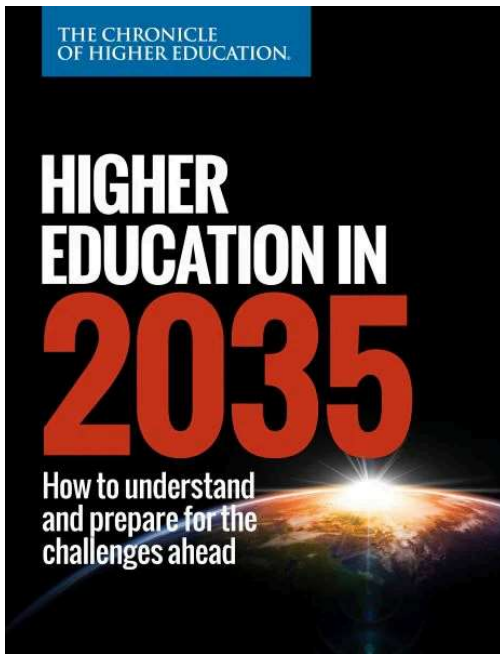
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