



ADVICE

A Plan to Rebuild History's Brand

Our departments don't have a problem with substance. We have a problem with storytelling.

By [Patryk J. Babiracki](#) August 12, 2025



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Historians are in the storytelling trade. It's time we told a better narrative about the relevance of our discipline.

Our graduates see that firsthand. An alum of my department, who earned a bachelor's degree in history and landed a job at a Fortune 500 company, said his co-workers often asked the same question: "How did you end up *here*?"

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Behind their curiosity lies a deep misunderstanding of what historians do and what history is. A [2021 survey](#) by the American Historical Association found that two-thirds of Americans think history is "names, dates, and other facts," and only 17 percent view the discipline as "an explanation of experiences in the past." Flip those proportions and that's how most historians view our craft.

Meanwhile, enrollments in history programs are falling as students and parents worry that a bachelor's degree in history has little ROI. [And yet, they're wrong](#). Job candidates with undergraduate and graduate degrees in our field possess exactly the skills that employers value most: analytical thinking, creative problem-solving, curiosity, communication, and the ability to learn continuously. By 2030, those skills promise to be [even more important](#) across industries.

As the master's-program director at the University of Texas at Arlington and host of the [Practical History](#) podcast, I have talked with dozens of history majors about their career plans. I've also talked with dozens of history-degree recipients who have built careers that are not obvious placements — in business, tech, and other industries. Those conversations have convinced me that, as historians, we've failed to market our discipline in ways that resonate with today's students and job market. That must change.

Here are five ways to build a stronger, more visible history brand.

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Tell more and better stories, especially about graduates working outside of academe. We love statistics about how well history graduates are faring in the work force. But as marketers know, consumers make decisions based on emotion, not just on data. When students are choosing majors or graduate fields, a chart is not going to be as compelling as real stories of successful history graduates using their skills to lead, create, and solve problems across industries.

Moreover, as Donald Miller argues in his 2017 book, *[Building a StoryBrand](#)*: “People don't buy the best products; they buy the products they can understand the fastest” — i.e., products that clearly show how they can help you deal with technical, personal, or even emotional challenges. The early success of Apple, for example, was not just because their products simplified and sped up many technical tasks, but also because the brand made users feel that it could unleash their creativity.

Our departments need stories like that. We need to help potential students see a history degree as a tool to become who and what they want to be.

At my university, I've tried this through two simple initiatives. One is [History Applied](#), a public symposium where we bring together students, faculty members, and business professionals to explore the relevance of history to an excitingly broad range of careers. The other is [Practical History](#), the podcast I host that features interviews with people who turned their history degrees into careers as strategists, consultants, entrepreneurs,

analysts, and more. They talk candidly about how history training helps them thrive in diverse roles and labor sectors.

These somewhat-experimental efforts have taught me that there's a whole world of history-degree graduates doing meaningful work beyond academe. And they're often eager to share how their education helped them succeed. Many have long worked "in hiding," answering the same question — "How did you end up *here*?" — as our alum. We should be elevating their stories to attract students to history and help them see how to chart their own paths.

Promote history as a way of thinking critically about change over time. In

business, tech, and policy realms, people constantly make decisions about humans, ideas, and institutions without understanding how they've changed. That's where historical thinking matters. As Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May wrote in their classic book, [*Thinking in Time*](#), decision makers always draw on the past; the task is to do it more intentionally.

Charles Halvorson, who received his Ph.D. in history at Columbia University and now works at Accenture, explained on my podcast that history allows you to see how systems evolve. "The present isn't the natural condition," [he said](#). "Everything has a history." That's something we take for granted in any history classroom and among professional peers. But it's not a given in business and tech, where reflecting on the past can seem counterintuitive, at best, and a waste of time, at worst.

Our graduates can help us make the case. Halvorson, for example, said he has used historical analysis to shape marketing strategies, customer-engagement efforts, and investment decisions. In one of his projects, he used knowledge of historical context to counter false assumptions about rural EV buyers by showing their past embrace of innovation.

Rishi Jaitly, a social entrepreneur and former Twitter executive who earned a bachelor's degree in history from Princeton University, [told me](#) that people in business are often trapped in "hyper-present or hyper-future mode." Historians add perspective — not just

hindsight, but insight into the forces shaping decisions today. Whatever the industry, injecting historical reasoning into strategy adds value. Because everything — markets, policies, institutions, ideas — changes over time.

Frame historical training as a superpower: research, analysis, and storytelling.

Historians are expert researchers. We know how to find information that others can't, especially in opaque ecosystems of archives, legal records, or nondigitized materials. That's why we're indispensable in historical consulting, law, environmental regulation, and beyond.

But we're not just good at finding information. We're good at making sense of it. Historians sift complexity, weigh evidence, and construct meaning. As [Terah Crews](#), chief executive of [ReUp Education](#) who earned a master's degree in history from Brown University, put it: Historians “can see complex data sets, complex information, and organize it into something that is meaningful.” That's not just analysis — it's leadership.

We're also storytellers. And storytelling is fundamental to business, leadership, and influence. Whether it's making a pitch, aligning a team, or persuading a board, the ability to communicate meaning clearly is a competitive advantage.

[Daniel Peris](#), a former history professor turned portfolio manager, told me that he uses [historical research](#), [analogy](#), and narrative to build investment strategies. Jaitly won business partnerships by framing an emerging market not just in terms of numbers, but “zeitgeist,” or a unique mood that defines a particular moment in history. And the brand archivist at Levi's [Tracey Panek](#) — recipient of a master's degree in public history — turned [a story about a Georgian man](#) trading his cow for a pair of jeans in the early 1980s into an award-winning global campaign.

It's on us — the professors and administrators worried about declining enrollments and the ROI of a history degree — to make this point known: Research, analysis and storytelling aren't “soft” skills; they are the backbone of leadership and strategy in the information economy.

Stop apologizing for history not being a science; show that it's more than that. We live in a data-driven world that prizes frameworks and forecasts, and history is rarely “predictive” in that sense. Yet that’s not a flaw. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis [has argued](#), the fuzziness of historical inquiry is what aligns it with the modern sciences of complexity, chaos, and criticality. History captures nuance. It accommodates ambiguity. It reveals the deep context behind change, helping us craft new approaches to decision making.

[Francisco Ramos](#), a University of Michigan history graduate who now leads data science at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, wrote his honors thesis about [Convivencia](#), a period of relative intercultural harmony in the history of medieval Spain. Today, he works on improving data models by accounting for what’s missing — race, ethnicity, gender, citizenship status — and what that means for society’s most vulnerable populations. And he continues channeling his passion for history into [deeply personal projects](#) that explore his family’s past and bridge fact, fiction, and imaginative use of historical methodologies.

History is often deeply personal, and it’s better that way. When students follow personal curiosity into history, they often find themselves asking larger, more analytical questions. Skeptics may dismiss that approach as “[me-search](#).” But really, it’s how all intellectual work starts, be it in history or medicine: Passion leads to method, and personal questions turn into public insights. Instead of deriding “me-search,” we should embrace it as a source of inspiration, intuition, and creativity that can help history graduates who choose to become strategists, leaders, or entrepreneurs.

Embrace the practical and engage the private sector. This might be the hardest one. Many academics see history’s value as standing in opposition to market forces or political manipulation. I get it. History and truth have been abused by regimes and bad actors. But we also have to face reality: Fewer Ph.D. students will find tenure-track jobs in the years ahead. Recognizing the applicability of their skills to careers in business and tech should become an important part of their training.

Yes, some of our history graduates — whether they earned a bachelor's, master's, or doctorate — will follow their passions and go into teaching, museum, or archival work. But most can't or don't want to, and that's OK. More will work in business, policy, and nonprofit sectors. That doesn't cheapen the discipline; it broadens its reach. It's a good thing to have history-educated humans shape a world that's increasingly delegated to AI.

We work for institutions that already function as businesses, and are hyperfocused on enrollments, recruitment strategies, and competition with peer institutions. And let's not kid ourselves: Our discipline has always depended on patrons — from royal courts to modern states — and still does. We can be critical of those alliances, but we can't pretend we're above them. With the U.S. government now seeming to abandon its support of research in history and other humanities fields, now might be the time to find new patrons.

So the new story about the relevance of history needs to destigmatize the private sector as a partner and a patron. Sharpen your departmental brand and make alumni stories more central to your outreach. Hire a marketing firm if you have to (one with a history graduate on staff would be ideal). Show students and parents that history is not only intrinsically meaningful and useful but a gateway to many different professions.

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

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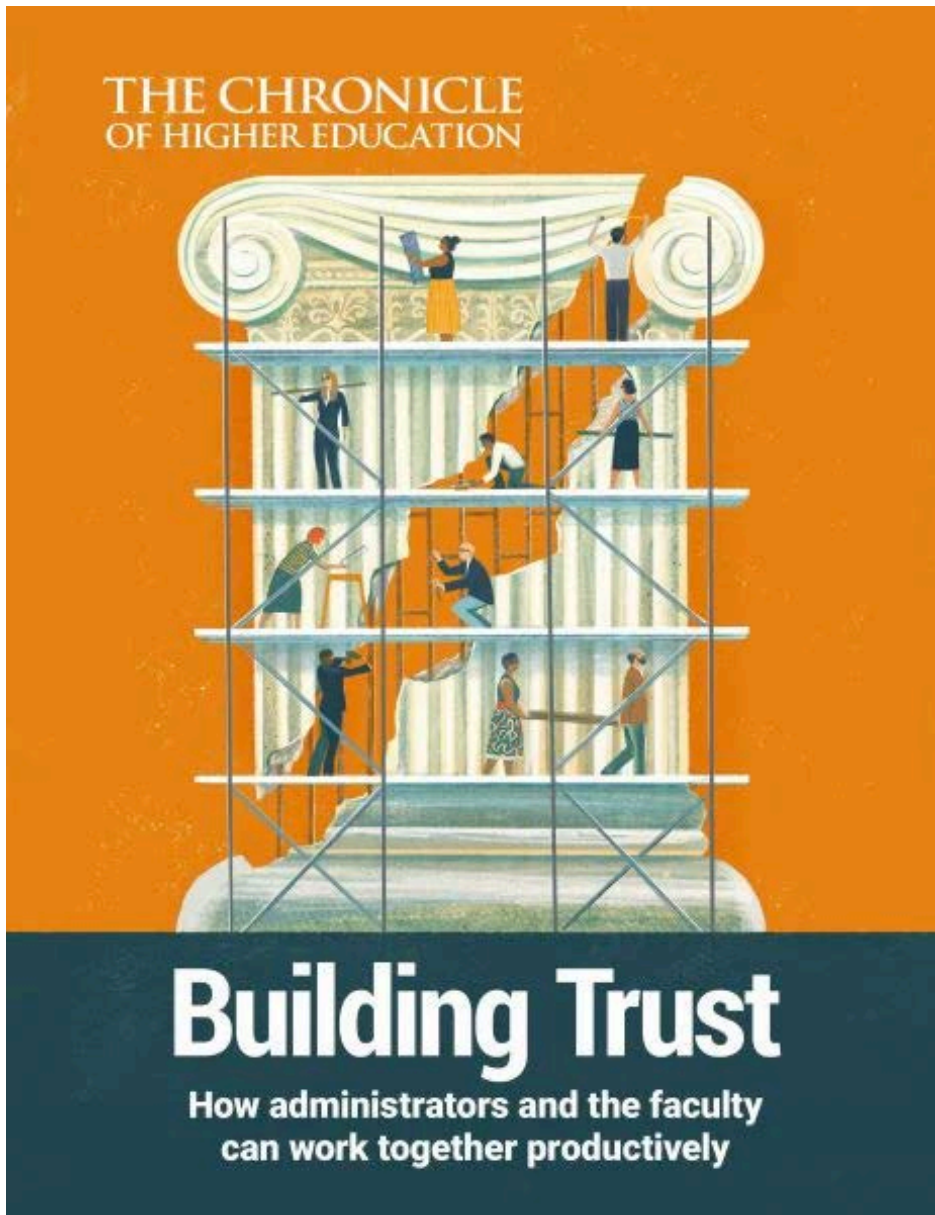
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Share**About the Author****Patryk J. Babiracki**

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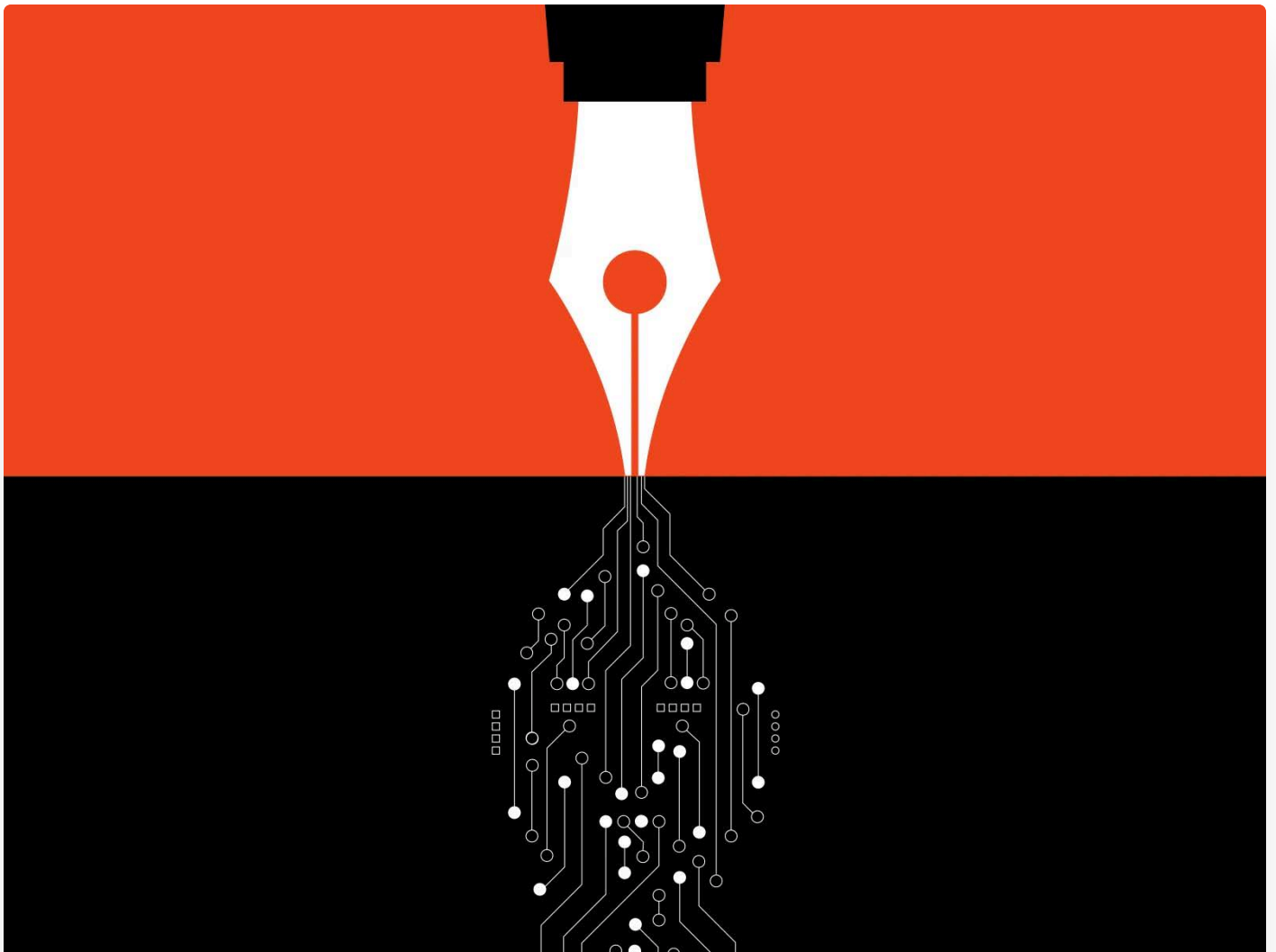
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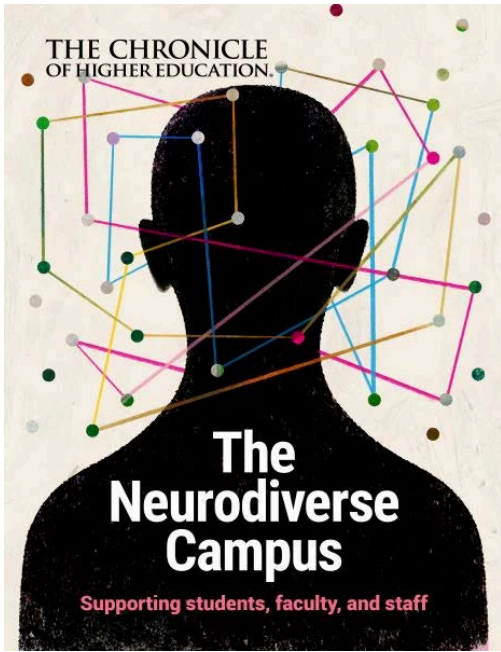


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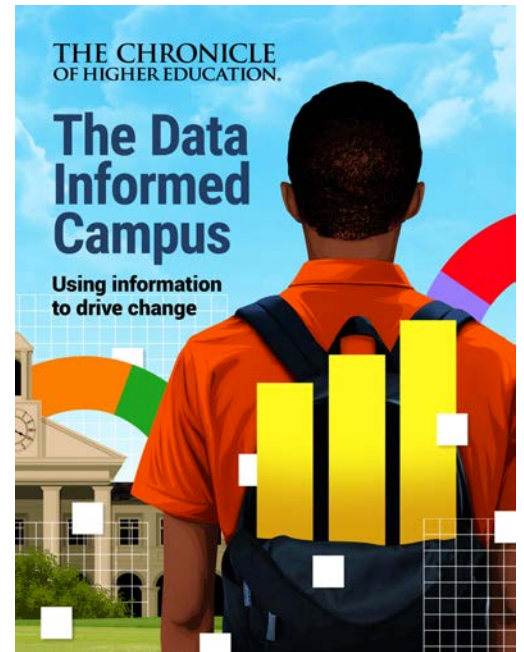


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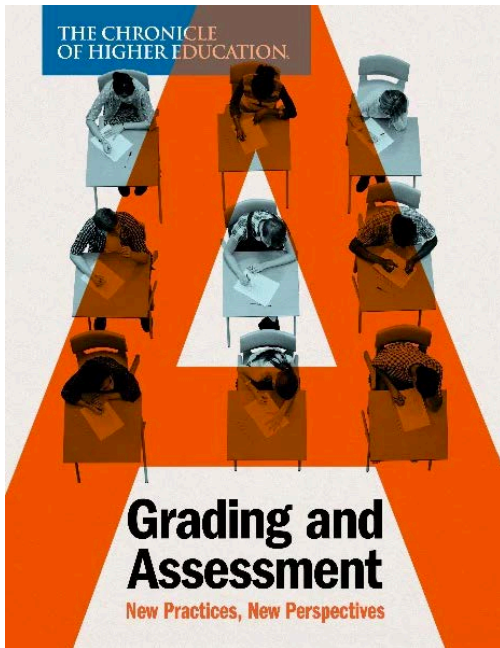
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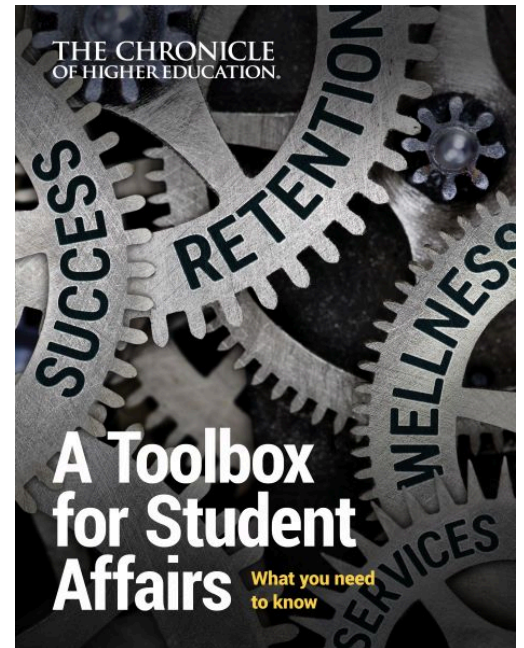
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