

History Graduation Celebration Friday, June 12, 2015

First, congrats to all the grads and their families! It's a big moment, and I'm honored to be here to share it with you and to say a few words on behalf of the faculty. We hope you all have a great weekend of celebrating, but since I don't imagine you need my help with celebrating, I want to use my few minutes up here to turn to the months ahead.

As happy as we all are this weekend, I know many of you are a little worried. Over the last couple months, I've had a lot of visitors in office hours, not from students coming to ask questions about classes, but from students wrestling with that next phase. You graduated; you learned tons of interesting stuff in history classes (or Jewish Studies, or German Studies, or Classics); so now what?

I'm going to be honest with you; I remember the first six months or so after I graduated from Boston University with my B.A. in History as some of the hardest of my life. I had no plans at that time to go farther with history—to go to grad school, or become a professor, or anything like that. I loved being an undergraduate student. I had learned a ton, worked really hard, had a lot of fun...and then it was over. I was ready to move on, but I had no idea to what.

You hear it a lot when you pursue a major like history (or Jewish Studies): People keep asking: *What are you going to do with that?* And others (maybe including you) say: *You can do anything you want! History majors go on to have successful careers doing all kinds of stuff!* But the question keeps coming back. That's because both sides of this conversation have a kernel of truth.

Those who say you can go on to anything from a History major are right. Our grads do all kinds of amazing stuff—they work for museums, write for newspapers, work in congressional offices, and run law firms.

But those asking, "What are you going to do with that?" have a point, too. Because it's not *obvious* how a history degree connects to these diverse professions. And that makes the next few months (or years) tricky. How do you get from the diploma you'll be handed this weekend to the career you want? How do you convince someone in your chosen field to hire you? Trickier still, how do you figure out which career to want in the first place?

Well, I'm either the best or the worst person to ask, because I struggled mightily with these issues after I graduated.

So how do you turn a history major (or a related humanities major) into a career?

There are a couple things I would emphasize. First, you have to market your skills. In your time here, working through your major, you've developed a lot of skills. You didn't just learn some facts about the Civil War, Julius Caesar, the Opium Wars, or the Holocaust. Along the way you developed useful, job-applicable skills (especially if you really applied yourself).

- You learned to manage deadlines.
- You learned to take brief instructions from a supervisor (i.e. professor) and go do a complex, independent project that fulfills their expectations.
 - Asking enough questions to get it right, but not pestering with too many questions.
- You learned to sift through large amounts of complicated information and identify trends and patterns.
- You learned to research a problem and present the results to an interested audience in a clear and compelling way.
- You learned to tell a story with a message.
- You learned to distinguish reliable sources of information from less sophisticated or highly biased sources.
- You learned to write clearly and persuasively in order to convince a reader to see an issue the way you do.

These are marketable skills... in a wide range of professions. Especially in an age when an infinite amount of information is at everyone's instantaneous disposal via the Internet, the ability to sift through that data, filter out the noise, and identify what's truly important is invaluable. And the ability to present findings clearly, to communicate effectively, to argue persuasively—these are skills that all sorts of employers say are top priorities. And scarce commodities.

So you have marketable skills...but you'll have to *market* them. Someone working in a public relations firm, or a government agency, or a market research company might not see "History Major" on your resume and realize you have exactly the skills they need. Even though you do.

So you need to be prepared to convince people. Sell the skills your History Major taught you! Here's one last assignment from a history professor. Go write a clear, concise cover letter to apply for a job. In 1-2 pages (with polished writing, free of typos) write a short essay explaining why you would be good at a job. Give specific evidence and examples of how your skills could translate to a certain work environment. If this sounds a lot like an assignment prompt from a history class, that's because it is! That's what I mean by the skills of your major being transferable. Use them to sell yourself!

Which brings me to another piece of advice: Be prepared to be resilient. Looking for a job is tedious, discouraging, soul sucking. No matter how good your essay about how awesome you are is, many employers will refuse to be convinced. So send out a

slew of cover letters and resumes, and then call your mom or your best friend and have them remind you how terrific you are, and then send out a bunch more.

But what if you don't know whom you're selling yourself to? What if you majored in German Studies because it was interesting but now you have no clear idea where you're trying to go from here?

I think the answer is deceptively simple. You have to try something. In fact, try a bunch of stuff. Brainstorm a list of professions that might interest you, and then think of ways to investigate them. It's a great idea to ask people in many professions for informational interviews—to just go for a coffee and chat about what their profession involves and how people get started in it. It's really helpful! Talk to friends of your parents, or friends of friends, about their careers. It gives you a chance to glimpse different professions and to show yourself off.

And if one of these professions starts to look good, find a way to show up and try it. It's often said that half of life is just showing up, but you have to show up in the right places. What I mean by that is, find ways to work (or volunteer, or intern) with companies or organizations doing things that are at least tangentially related to what you want to do. You may have to be creative and committed to make this happen, especially if you need to take a less interesting job to pay your rent.

Here, I think a personal story might help. When I graduated with my History degree, and absolutely no idea of what I wanted to do with my life, I faced an immediate challenge. I knew it would take time to find a job that was interesting, but I needed to pay the rent and feed myself more or less immediately. When my essay about how awesome I was surprisingly failed to yield immediate results, I started working several days per week for a little construction company that I had worked for a bit during school. But when they offered me *fulltime* work, I said no, to make sure I left time to look for something that I saw as more rewarding (nothing against construction, but I wasn't particularly skilled at it, and it wasn't what I ultimately wanted).

Eventually I found out that Houghton Mifflin, a big publishing firm, had a temp program, and I got hired there. It was just two days a week, and the pay was appalling, but the construction paid my rent and working for a publisher for peanuts gave me a glimpse of some different careers and got my foot in the door.

And after a few months of working for Houghton Mifflin part time, I convinced an Internet startup that was trying to make the first online textbooks to hire me as an editor. Then I became one of their product managers and worked there for a couple years. And only then did I figure out that I was more interested in what the professors who wrote our content were doing than I was in making or selling online textbooks, so I decided to become a professor.

Anyway, I'm only telling you this because it was a roundabout route to finding a career that I love. And if I had just worked construction because it was the most lucrative thing I could find after school, I don't think I would have found my way to it. If any of you came to the History Department's Undergraduate Research Symposium this year, one of our alumni, Eryn Brennan, who now works in architecture and historic preservation, told a similar story about her career path. Right after school she was "serving fries" to pay the rent, as she put it, but she made time to volunteer at a history museum on the side because that exposed her to some careers that interested her, and it gave her some experience to build upon. Eventually that side gig led to her rewarding career.

So there are a few lessons here, I think. Make time to try interesting stuff (even if it doesn't pay well). And, don't feel like you have to find your life's work right out of the gate. You're young! You should feel free to try on a career and decide that you hate it. (I had a "career" at a public relations firm for four days in there somewhere!) You can always try something else.

OK, but before I turn you loose on the rest of your lives, I want to mention one more thing about what you've learned here. So far I've mostly talked about jobs and careers and the marketable skills you've developed, but there is more to life than working. And there is more to the education you've pursued here than vocational training.

Of course, I hope you all get great jobs and find career success, but I think true education is about much more than that. It's preparation for life. Studying history teaches us to look at the world around us in an informed way, to be cognizant of how legacies of the past shape our present.

As historians, we often read between the lines of historical documents written by biased authors to glimpse a truth that an author may not have wanted us to see. For example, we read the account of a slaveholder who describes a new slave as an idiot because he can't learn to use a wheelbarrow, but rather keeps picking up the wheelbarrow by the wheel and jabbing the handles into the ground, and we don't see an imbecile; instead we see defiance—an enslaved man refusing to follow instructions, refusing to do the work demanded of him.

Well, reading between the lines, and recognizing the lies that biased authors or speakers are telling is an important life skill. Our public discourse is full of lies and biased accounts, but we can't afford to just ignore everything. Instead, when you read or watch the news, and evaluate politicians, you need to filter out bias and seek the truth between the lines. You also need historical context. When seeking to understand modern social and political tensions, in Ferguson or Fallujah, you need to keep in mind historical legacies that led to the present.

The ghosts of the past are all around us and need to be reckoned with if we're to make sound choices about where we're headed as individuals and as a society.

So as you move on, most of you to careers not directly related to the history major, I encourage you to keep in mind what history has taught you—in the sense of both marketable skills and a contextualized, historically grounded worldview. I know I'm a biased source, but I think history has much to teach us about where we might be headed and the baggage we'll carry.

But mostly, congratulations!