



A letter to parents.

I am a professor of History, but I'm also a parent. I have stayed up all night worrying about my children and I have scrimped to pay for their college educations. I want my children to be happy, to be safe, and to be self-supporting. (With one child in college and another soon to go, boy, do I want that!)

I know that it seems like a history degree is a waste of time and money but it can bring them places you might not imagine. My own parents told me that I might as well get a job at McDonalds and then begged me to get my teaching certificate when I became a history major. But that was fear talking. A few decades after I finished college, they congratulated me on finding my own way in the world.

Save yourself from the fear by knowing this:

History majors can be journalists, doctors, writers, educators, lawyers, managers, editors, grant writers, archivists, librarians, diplomats, veterinarians, and professional basketball players. The BA in History is a well-respected degree that opens doors to law school, diplomatic programs, medical school, PhD programs, programs in public policy, urban studies, and administration. Historians work in public service, serve in the military, work in galleries, museums, and archives, work in universities, the law, and government, run big businesses and open small businesses.

Think I'm exaggerating? What do these business leaders have in common?

Carly Fiorina, former CEO Hewlett-Packard
Ken Chenault, former CEO American Express
Brian Moynihan, CEO Bank of America)
Sam Palmisano, former CEO of IBM)
A. G. Lafley, former CEO of Proctor and Gamble)

According to a *Business Insider* article from 2012, they all have degrees in history.
<https://www.businessinsider.com/successful-liberal-arts-majors-2012-12?op=1>

What did John F. Kennedy, Joe Biden, Bill Bradley, Sonia Sotomayor, and Newt Gingrich study? Again, it's the degree in history.

The history degree teaches students how to think, how to write, how to research, how to organize data, how to analyze, how to explain what happened, how to act ethically, how to back up claims. Historians know causation, correlation, and concentration; they know how to speak, how to listen, how to understand others.

According to an article in *The New York Review of Books*, “arts and culture contribute more than \$760 billion a year to the US economy—4.2 percent of GDP.” The liberal arts “incubate ideas, provide ethical standards, and raise questions about the status quo.” Though these might not seem valuable, think about how much value the play *Hamilton* brought. After starting as a 900 page biography, it became a Broadway play, a companion book, a national tour, and a set of copywrited songs, books, and paraphernalia. It is estimated that it will generate up to \$1 billion. That’s value. And that’s just one book.

Students at elite schools like Yale, Princeton, and Brown know the value of history. At Yale, they have been hiring more historians to keep up with demand. And at Brown, they’ve been increasing the number of history classes offered. Why, then, do schools like University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point talk about ending the major? To give the kindest explanation possible, maybe they are thinking about getting jobs for graduates as soon as they graduate.

What they don’t realize is that history majors know how to learn. The world changes. This has been true since Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War. Most people go to college as preparation for the world. They go out into the world with a set of skills that might work when they graduate, but will the same skill sets work a decade later or two decades after that? When history majors stay up late reading books, when they imagine world radically different than the one we’re in right now, they are learning how to learn. I started college with a typewriter using a card catalog. I now write on a computer, using the worldwide web and massive databases, linked to colleagues across the globe. I can keep up not because I am a technocrat but because I learned how to learn in college. The world changes and I remake my skills. That’s what you want for your children. The world is a scary place. It’s hard to know how to what to tell them. But telling them to train themselves narrowly won’t save them from the world. It will just make them vulnerable in a few decades when you are not around to help and when they might not have the capacity to go back and re-tool. So let them study the past and understand the present. And feel free to join them. We always welcome returning students!

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