

What do history students do? What do they learn?

One common misconception is that history is about memorizing the names and birthdays of dead people. This is especially tragic because, in many ways, history isn't really about the "past" at all. **History is an approach to understanding the present and our uncertain future.** With every major catastrophe—be it COVID-19 or the 2008 economic catastrophe—there is always a mad dash to search the past for what lessons it might have for us: to discern what clues the past may contain about the future. Historians are convinced that the best way to figure out where we are and where we are going—politically, economically, socially, culturally—is by understanding how we got here.

As a field rooted in deep, multi-faceted engagement with the makings of the modern world, history students also develop a rich set of skills employers routinely report valuing most. As a historian, you will learn how to locate and analyze relevant quantitative and qualitative data, how to think through complicated questions and develop (and defend) novel answers, and how to think creatively and communicate clearly. Moreover, you will come away from all this with a deeper knowledge of the inner workings of global cultures, societies, economies, and political systems.

How do historians make a living?

As professors, we unfortunately hear the following all too often from students: "Oh, I *love* history! But, I'm worried about making a living!" While it is of course disappointing to hear students giving up on doing something they love, it is especially disappointing because the underlying premise is totally **false!** Indeed, students (and especially *parents!*) are often surprised to learn that historians actually do quite well! Twenty years out from the start of their career, the median full-time worker with a history degree makes \$83,000 (2014 dollars). This compares *very* favorably to other programs.

Degrees & Median Salaries of Full-Time Workers, 20 years in	2014 dollars
History	\$83,000
Median of All Degree Programs	\$80,000
Business Management	\$77,000
Health and Medical Administration	\$77,000
Nursing	\$76,000
Treatment Therapy Professions	\$76,000
Communication Technologies	\$73,000
Journalism	\$71,000
English Language/Literature	\$69,000
Advertising and Public Relations	\$69,000
Criminology and Criminal Justice	\$68,000
Psychology	\$65,000
Sociology	\$63,000
High School or GED	\$37,000

The average history degree-holder will out-earn the average student of Business Management, Health and Medical Administration, Nursing, Treatment and Therapy Professions, Communication Technologies, Journalism, English, Advertising, Criminology, Psychology, and Sociology.

Even in the sciences, the median undergraduate history major—20 years out—will make 7% more than the median Biology major, the same as the median Earth/Physical Science major, and just \$1,000 less than the median Chemist!

Data from the Hamilton Project

This may sound surprising... But ask yourself: are there employers out in the world willing to pay *good money* to find smart people with extensive training in analyzing and interpreting vast amounts of data? People who understand how our social, economic, and political systems work, why they work, and how they came together? People who read critically and write well? Yes! Of course!

There is a reason History majors have among of the highest rates of successful admission to law school (You have a 37% better chance of getting into law school with a history degree than a criminal justice degree!). **History majors become sharp data analysts, critical thinkers, excellent writers, and develop a keen sense of how our world works and how it evolved.**

And—to repeat—here is the *really* good news: these are all critical skills employers routinely report valuing most. This is confirmed by virtually every study we have of what skills employers actually want from new recruits. As the most recent survey of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found, Oral (85%) and Written (82%) Communication, Working Effectively in Teams (83%), Ethical Judgment (81%), Critical/Analytical Thinking (81%), Applying Knowledge/ Skills to the Real World (80%), Analyzing/Solving Complex Problems (70%), Locating, Organizing, and Evaluating Information (68%), and Being Innovative/Creative (65%) are the skills most desired of college graduates. These are **all skills** historians are forced to develop in spades!

What sorts of jobs do historians get?

We often associate history majors with **schools, museums, and archives**. And there is some truth to that! About **16%** of History majors become **elementary & secondary educators**, and an additional **5%** or so teach at the **college level** as professors or instructors. And, if your interest is in actually *doing* history, Boise State has an especially strong **Public History and History Internship** program that has successfully placed countless graduates as historical site interpreters, museum specialists, archivists, librarians, and government historians, among others. The (sizeable!) list of our internship partners can be found here: <https://www.boisestate.edu/history/internship-program/>.

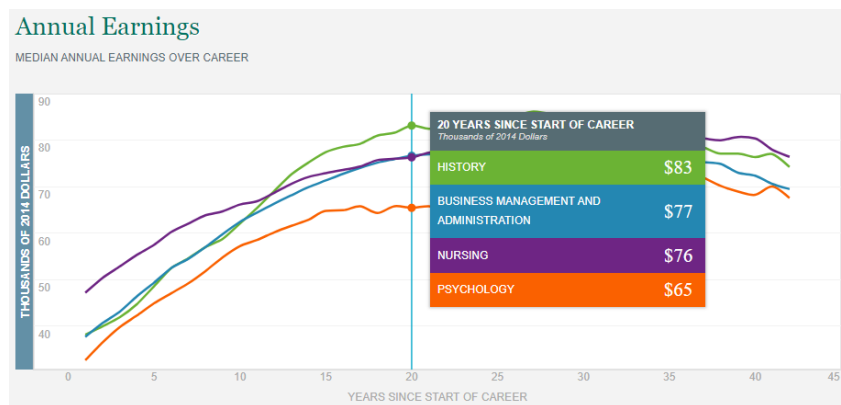
That said, most historians actually end up taking their research expertise, analytic abilities, and writing skills and leveraging them into fields that aren't necessarily "historical" in nature. **16%** go into **law-related work** as judges, lawyers, paralegals, etc. Another **16%** end up as some form of **manager, supervisor, or chief executive**. About **5%** end up in the fields of **market or financial analysis**. About **4%** end up in **educational administration**. Beyond that, there are many other fields that benefit from the skills history inculcates: everything from clergy work (about 2% of history majors) and physicians/surgeons (another 2%) to sales (4%) and social work (1%).

Ultimately, it seems most people's doubts about how successful they will be as history majors stems from a misunderstanding of what the field is really about. They imagine applying to their first job out of college with a cover letter that details the minutiae of their thesis on the 1940s global economy, and wonder what good that will do them...

But the reality is that your cover letter will actually be about all the valuable skills you developed pursuing your thesis on how World War II transformed the economy. It might detail the on-the-job skills you took from your internship at the Idaho Military History Museum. It might mention how your coursework (maybe you took our Civil War, World War I, World War II or Korean War course; our History of American Capitalism course; or perhaps our courses on Ancient Rome or the Modern Middle East) taught you to write clearly, read deeply, and think critically about how war and defense shape our economy and our politics. It might focus on how your thesis saw you grind through reams of qualitative and quantitative data, showing how defense manufacturing boosted the global/national economy. It might explain how those experiences honed your analytic, interpretative, and problem-solving abilities. It might also detail how you got to present your original research to a public audience at the annual History Honors Society conference. **History is about developing a deeper understanding of our world... and mastering the skills necessary to actually achieve that deeper understanding! Employers, we know, value both!**

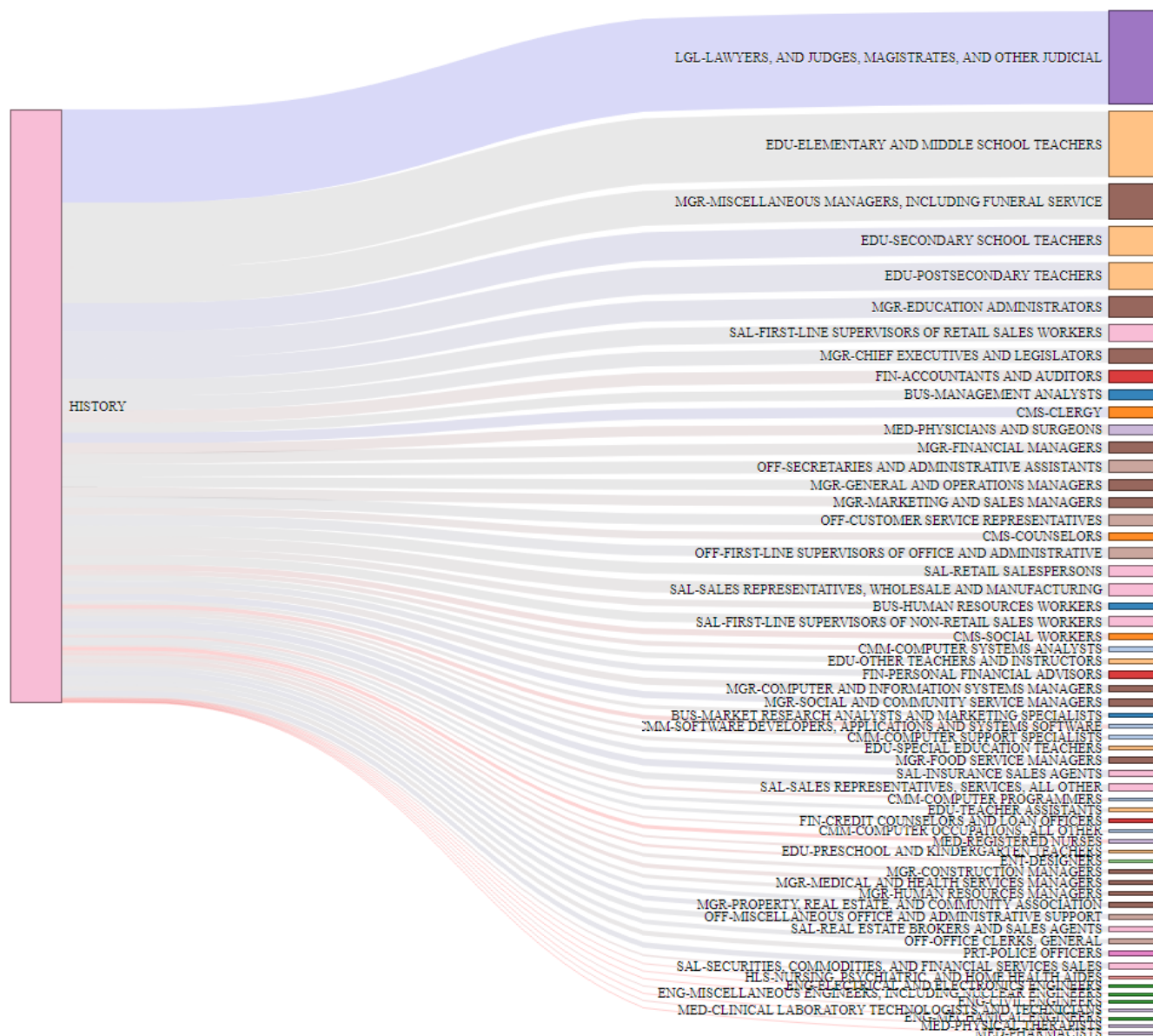
Lifetime earnings: History majors compared to Boise State's most popular majors

See: https://www.hamiltonproject.org/charts/career_earnings_by_college_major/



Recorded career trajectories of over 400,000 History Majors

Compiled by New York University Director of Digital Humanities, Ben Schmidt: <http://benschmidt.org/jobs/>



We hope you will join us! Please feel free to contact me (shaunnichols@boisestate.edu), our internship coordinator, Bob Reinhardt (bobreinhardt@boisestate.edu), or our undergraduate advisor, Joanne Klein (jklein@boisestate.edu), if you have any questions!