

Report on Research with Employers of Graduates with History Majors

Executive Summary

In 2009, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) began the Tuning project, intended to determine what is most important for graduates with a major in history to know, understand, and be able to do. A team of history professors, composed of one history faculty member from each USHE institution, worked together to determine critical learning outcomes and the competencies that support those outcomes that would be common to all college and university programs in the state. The project directors administered a survey to employers, and a focus group was conducted with 12 employers who specifically hire history majors. The following summary conclusions are representative of the information found throughout the report:

- The top 6 skills desired by those hiring history majors were ability to research, good communication (written and oral), critical thinking, ability to organize, passion for the subject, and knowledge of the subject area. The ranking of these varied according to the nature of the institution, and the ability to research was the only skill listed in the top 5 by all 12 participants.
- In hiring a new employee, various participants look for personality, qualifications, experience, training in specific areas in addition to the basic history courses, customer service skills, and the ability to manage a project.
- Indications of skills in an applicant included references, a good cover letter, and information obtained from the applicant's Facebook site.
- Because of the variety of the work of the participants, they all felt that some on-the-job training was necessary. The consensus was that this was best done through robust internships.
- The strengths of recent hires have been organization skills, technology skills, strong training in Mormon history (specific to the participants from the church), writing skills, and a work ethic.
- Some gaps in the training of graduates are that they need to be more diversified, to have more coursework in Utah history, western history, and public history, and to be better able to analyze primary documents.
- Within Utah, participants hire from the University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Utah State University. They reported hiring from schools throughout the country, seeking graduates from programs meeting their specific needs.
- Participants recommended that curriculum in history include introduction to public history at the undergraduate level and a strong master's program in public history. Emphasis in a specific area of history would be useful although they did value diversity and adaptability. A strong internship program with cooperation between faculty and mentors was suggested. Research skills, particularly with primary sources, are critical.
- Use of the focus group provided insights not found through the use of the survey. Future use of focus groups with other disciplines and stakeholders is strongly recommended.

Report on Research with Employers of Graduates with History Majors

Introduction to the Study

Working on a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) began the Tuning project, intended to determine what is most important for graduates with a major in history to know, understand, and be able to do. A team of history professors worked together to determine critical learning outcomes and the competencies that support those outcomes that would be common to all college and university programs in the state. In order to determine what employers were seeking, the project directors conducted research using a survey similar to one that had been used in Europe. A focus group was also conducted with 12 employers who specifically hire history majors. This report is based on information from the focus group, but it also includes results from the previous survey. A second objective of this research was to determine the value of focus groups for the current research. The focus group was conducted by Shannon Fletcher from Lighthouse Research. The research team consisted of the following individuals:

Bill Evenson, Ph.D., Tuning Project Director, Utah

Teddi Safman, Ph.D., Assistant Commissioner for Academic Affairs, Utah System of Higher Education

Norm Jones, Ph.D., Chair, Department of History, Utah State University

Janice Gygi, Ph.D., Tuning Project Associate Director, Utah

Guiding Questions

In order to verify the results of the survey and to determine if other issues should be considered, the research team developed a list of 7 key questions that would help guide the history team to confirm and prioritize their current learning objectives. The questions are:

1. What skills do you expect from a history major? What is unique about the training of a history major?
2. What do you look for when you are hiring a new employee? What is the most useful indicator of what the applicant can do?
3. What type of on-the-job training do you expect to do with any new hire? Do history majors necessarily need less on-the-job training than other majors? What type of educational background makes this training easier?
4. In evaluating the education of history majors, what do you find to be the most useful skills that they possess? What are the universities doing really well?
5. Are there gaps in what you have expected and what the graduates can do? What are the specific problem areas that you would like to see improved?
6. From what colleges and universities do you hire?
7. If you were the person in charge of setting the curriculum for Utah's university and college history majors, what would you do to make sure they are successful in the marketplace?

Data Collection Process

1. The history team was composed of a history professor from each state university and college in Utah. They worked with their departments to determine the outcomes that were appropriate for history majors. Secondary research was used to examine outcomes that had been developed by professional organizations, such as the American Historical Association. A draft of the outcomes is attached in Appendix A.

2. A survey, based on that used in the Tuning Project in Europe, was administered to faculty, students, alumni, and employers. For the employer survey, the results from employers of both physics and history graduates were combined, with 26 respondents for the entire survey and 21 respondents for those that selected the top 5 competencies. Most of the respondents were from technical disciplines rather than history.
3. On December 8, 2010, 12 employers, who specifically hire history majors, participated in a two-hour focus group session at Lighthouse Research. The session was facilitated by Shannon Fletcher, Director of Market Research, PRC (Professional Research Certification) certified as expert. The research team watched the proceedings from the engineering room. Participants included one individual from a private firm doing history research, three from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) Department of History, two from the Utah State Archives, two from the Utah State Historical Society, three from historical museums, and one from the archive section of a state university. Each participant was given \$75, delivered immediately at the end of the session. The session was taped and DVD copies were provided to the Tuning research team. Additional copies were sent to the Lumina Foundation, the funding organization for the Tuning project.

Major Findings and Recommendations

Each question was analyzed using the focus group responses and the survey results. In some cases, the focus group responses varied depending on the way the question was posed. Each participant had a workbook in which they wrote the answers to many of the questions. Eleven of the 12 workbooks were collected after the session and were used for the evaluation. The results are discussed below.

1. What skills do you expect from a history major? What is unique about the training of a history major?

Each participant was asked to give the top skill on his or her list. Then participants were asked to offer any other skill that had not been listed. After the list was completed, participants were asked to vote for their top five. In several instances, skills that had been listed were consolidated. The subcategories below indicate the skills that were included in the major heading. The results (and the number of participants voting for each one) are:

1. Ability to research (12)
2. Good communication – written and verbal (10)
 - a. Ability to write for an audience
 - b. Publishing experience
3. Critical thinking (6)
 - a. Creative problem solving
 - b. Analytical thinking
 - c. Analyzing problems
4. Ability to organize – index and catalog (5)
5. Passion for the subject – curiosity (5)
6. Knowledge of the subject (5)

An evaluation of the individual workbooks showed that the desired skills varied according to the particular institution that was hiring. While all 12 participants voted for research skills as one of their top 5, those who had research skills listed as number 1 were 6 individuals from the state historical departments and the LDS Church historical departments. The museum people listed traits such as good personality, customer service skills, ability to work with all age groups, passion for history, and frugality. (It appears that the museums struggle to obtain resources.)

When asked to rate the top 5 priorities on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all important and 7 is very important, the skills desired were rated as follows:

1. Critical thinking (6.3)
2. Good communication (6.3)
3. Ability to organize (6.1)
4. Ability to research (6.0)
5. Passion for the subject/Knowing the subject (5.9)

Again, these represent averages, and individuals in different institutions rated the skills very differently. It was not unusual to have an individual rate 3 skills at the 7 level.

When asked to rate how the graduates from Utah universities and colleges actually perform on these skills on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 was poor and 7 was excellent, the results were:

1. Passion for the subject/Knowing the subject (5.6)
2. Ability to research (4.9)
3. Ability to organize (4.8)
4. Good communication (4.7)
5. Critical thinking (4.4)

The top 5 priorities from the survey respondents were:

1. Ability to work in a team
2. Oral and written communication
3. Ability to identify, pose, and resolve problems
4. Determination and perseverance in tasks and responsibilities
5. Ability to plan and manage time

When asked to rate the importance of skills on a 1- to 4-point scale, with 1 being none and 4 being strong, the following skills emerged:

1. Ability to evaluate and maintain the quality of work produced (3.81)
2. Ability to identify, pose, and resolve problems (3.81)
3. Determination and perseverance in tasks and responsibilities (3.81)
4. Ability to plan and manage time (3.81)
5. Ability to work in a team (3.77)

As with the focus-group participants, the diversity amongst the respondents to the survey accounted for the differences in the priorities and the rankings of important skills. In the survey, respondents were allowed to select from 31 characteristics. In the focus group, the skills were

limited to the 5 previously selected by the group. In addition, the survey had more respondents than the focus group, providing more diversity in the rankings.

When asked to rate a graduate's actual skill, the employers on the survey responded:

1. Essential knowledge and understanding of academic subjects and profession (3.28)
2. Information and communications technologies skills (3.16)
3. Capacity to learn and update learning (3.12)
4. Ability to undertake research at an appropriate level (3.00)
5. Ability to search for, process, and analyze information (3.0)

When asked the question, "If a person with a history degree was a type of vehicle, what brand of vehicle would he or she be? Why?" focus group responses were quite different from the skills listed above, and tended, perhaps, to be more indicative of work ethic or personality characteristics than academic skills. Six of the 10 indicated that versatility or flexibility was important. Other traits included reliability, dependability, easy to maintain, and can find out how to do something they don't know how to do.

According to these results, it appears that the one learning outcome that may be unique to history is the ability to research. All the participants indicated that they did want to hire history majors, and they discussed the specific skills, such as evaluation of primary sources, that are unique to history research. All of the other outcomes are expected of graduates with any bachelor's degree, including knowledge of a specific discipline. Employers seem to want "well educated" graduates with the skills learned through a liberal education.

2. What do you look for when you are hiring a new employee? What is the most useful indicator of what the applicant can do?

The traits and skills desired depend on the level at which one is employed. Less is expected of student hires than of hires with graduate degrees. Some of the traits the employers were seeking were:

Personality was suggested. "I have found in my experience it's much easier to teach a skill than to change somebody's personality. If they're not one that's inclined to want to talk to people and be outgoing, it's very difficult to work with that, whereas a skill and knowledge can always be trained." Another desired trait was to be able to work with others and be a part of a team.

One participant reported that in a previous job as a history consultant, subject matter and expertise were valuable, but more important was "finding people who could write well, who really knew the historical methodology, and we tried to measure that by making sure that they sent in writing samples, which we insisted were not published pieces, because we couldn't tell from a published piece how much editing had been done prior to that."

Qualifications and experience are very important, as is attention to detail.

"Well, my experience with public history is that having the subject area expertise in history and having passion for it is sort of a baseline. Beyond that then I would always look for people who've had additional training in archives and historic preservation and architecture and architectural history. In all the jobs I've had, there's always been a need for people who go

beyond the traditional history training.” Training is important in other areas such as library science, archives, historic preservation, and archeology. The broader their training the better qualified they are.

“In the library world, I think customer service is one thing. We had to have someone that can work with the public well. There are a lot of historians that can’t.” This was also important in the work in museums.

“One thing I haven’t really looked for in my career, but I’m finding is critical today is the ability to manage projects. Project management is a new, big field that is important in a lot of businesses.” Technology skills are also becoming increasingly important.

Some additional indicators of skills

References are important. Later in the discussion the participants indicated that they often hire from each other, and the recommendations and experience are critical.

The structure and breadth of the cover letter can be very telling. “It is always nice” to have correct punctuation and grammar.

“One of the things we’ve caught onto is to get onto their Facebook site. You see what kind of comments they are making back and forth. That can be a real indicator.” There was considerable agreement about this among the participants.

3. What type of on-the-job training do you expect to do with any new hire? Do history majors necessarily need less on-the-job training than other majors? What type of educational background makes this training easier?

“Every organization is unique and . . . that’s why we like interns that volunteer with us, because for free we teach them the job, and then, if we end up hiring them, they already know it. Every collection is very unique. It’s hands on.”

“To be effective, our volunteers or interns need to understand our relationships with the organizations above us and how they’re organized, and where you go to get stuff from what we call our higher headquarters. There are different staff functions in those organizations that are over us.” Learning how to work within a bureaucracy effectively is important.

“We have the two programs, so we have to teach anyone that comes in records management, because no one teaches records management.” But each institution has its own unique records management regulations and it’s specific.

With government records, there is a presumption of openness, and that all records are public, but there is also the expectation of the public for privacy, so the processing of records (in state institutions) is very complicated and must be taught. Some employees had not learned how to keep a research log and organize their work, so this had to be taught.

The libraries and archives have to teach referencing and where to find things. The technical skills that must be taught vary amongst the institutions, and include access, preservation, and

presentation, as well as learning the applicable standards. In one of the museums, they must teach things such as churning butter, spinning yarn, and lighting a fire.

At one of the historical research agencies, “probably 70% of the historical work that we did . . . was in support of litigation, and so we had to train our employees about the life of a legal case, so when they were asked to write an expert witness report, they knew they were coming in at a certain part of the case, and they knew what had already gone on before and what they could expect the attorneys to be asking of them.” So training in forensic history was important.

The participants indicated that the amount of on-the-job training was not dependent on the degree held by the individual. They thought that it was often more dependent on the individual and his or her skills.

In general, the participants encourage those hired with bachelor’s degrees to pursue a further education, but few had any means of supporting this. In addition, they encouraged individuals to become active in professional organizations. Some of them buy memberships and encourage employees to attend conferences of the professional organizations.

4. In evaluating the education of history majors, what do you find to be the most useful skills that they possess? What are the universities doing really well?

Recent hires have been organized and know how to use technology.

“We’ve hired some people that are very bright and very well trained in Mormon history. . . . They’re coming out of history departments that have religious study programs” (particularly Utah State University). They have a broad understanding of what other historians have done in other fields and of historical methodology and historiography.

“The last few interns we’ve had have had good writing abilities. That’s something that we haven’t always seen. They may be exceptions, but they’ve done very well.”

Those who have hired professionals have found they have had a very good work ethic, though this is not always the case with those hired for summer museum jobs. The volunteers and interns have a passion already, so there’s quite a bit of work ethic in that in the first place. “They just love being there.”

5. Are there gaps in what you have expected and what the graduates can do? What are the specific problem areas that you would like to see improved?

Graduates need to be more diversified. Some want to just be curators or do individual research. They need to be able to work with the public. “You’ve got to do all kinds of stuff.”

Some critical coursework appears to be lacking. For example, the employers tend to work with Utah history and would like the graduates to spend time on Utah history or western history, “rather than far eastern or medieval studies.” Another course area that many felt was lacking was public history. Most of the employers deal with public history and did not feel that graduates had any background in that at all.

The employers want graduates who have experience in analyzing primary documents. They felt that students tend to read and analyze books but do not use the original documents. Graduates are willing to accept secondary research rather than doing their own primary research. Experience with directed primary research would be valuable.

When the museums hired temporary summer workers, they often felt the students had a poor work ethic.

6. From what colleges and universities do you hire?

Three Utah universities were mentioned: University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Utah State University. One of the museums had hired 3 summer employees from Utah Valley University, and one participant indicated he was surprised no one had mentioned Weber State University, because “they have a strong history department.”

The participants indicated that they often hired from outside the state. They were looking for schools that trained in such areas as library science, archives, public history, historic preservation, and English folklore. Schools that were mentioned as having supplied graduates were Santa Barbara, BYU Idaho, North Carolina, Colorado, York, and Eastern Illinois. They also indicated that they often hired from their interns and volunteers.

One individual said that “in 1985, the University of Utah had the best history program in the country. And now it has no reputation whatsoever in that way.”

7. If you were the person in charge of setting the curriculum for Utah’s university and college history majors, what would you do to make sure they are successful in the marketplace?

Several participants indicated that at least an introduction to public history at the undergraduate level would be important, and a master’s program with a strong emphasis on public history would be valuable. They felt that “Utah university programs are doing nothing to distinguish them from any other public university or program.” There are programs in other states that do distinguish themselves, so they’re more likely to hire from those programs. They felt that a major that had a little more application to a specific area of history, rather than just a general history degree, would be useful.

On the other hand, they did want versatility, flexibility, and adaptability. A graduate would need to be able to fit into whatever position that was available.

A robust internship program was considered to be vital to the training of students. “I think I would like to follow the model that they use in education, where there’s a real partnership between the faculty and the mentor in a student teaching situation. Often, the interns hear about an opportunity, and they just treat it as a part time summer job, and we treat it that way as well. I think we could improve the internship experience if we had a relationship with the faculty, and some educational objectives were associated with the internship.” Throughout the session, participants stressed the importance of internships. One stated that he saw his facility as “a laboratory to teach students to do at least some kinds of public history, like oral history, archives, and things like that. . . . That’s really what’s going to help graduates to have that hands-on experience.” They valued a combination of the intellectual content with the practical

application. In addition to providing experience for students, several participants indicated that they often hired from among their interns.

The participants felt that research skills were critical, and they wanted the students to be able to find and analyze primary sources. They indicated that graduates often have skill in analyzing secondary sources, but they needed some directed training in the use of primary resources.

Future Research Suggestions and Limitations of the Present Study

- 1) Participants in the present study represented employers who hire graduates specifically for their degrees in history. Many graduates find positions in firms or institutions where their skills are valued, but where they are not involved in projects concerning history. Other focus groups might be conducted with employers who have hired history majors, but who do not work in history.
- 2) Although there was some agreement between the focus group input and the previous survey on important skills for history graduates, the survey did not really include questions on discipline-specific skills such as research and knowledge of the subject. A second survey, including more discipline-specific questions would be valuable.
- 3) Because of the small number of participants, findings from a focus group cannot be generalized. However, often a contribution of even one individual can provide valuable insight into the issues of concern. The focus group provided good information about the important learning outcomes, but it also provided suggestions for improvements that could be helpful to the universities and colleges. Future use of focus groups in other disciplines is recommended. Faculty, students, and alumni, in addition to employers, could offer valuable insights.
- 4) The differences in ratings between the skills that employers value and the skills that graduates are perceived to possess should be evaluated. Is the discrepancy more important in some areas than others? Do employers expect to provide on-the-job training for some skills more than others? What is an “acceptable” level of skills?

Appendix A
Learning Outcomes – History
Draft – 12/16/2010

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

- I. (Range of historical information)
 - A. Identify the key events which express/define change over time in a particular place or region.
 - B. Identify how change occurs over time
 - C. Explain historical continuity and change
 - D. Describe the influence of political ideologies, economic structures, social organization, cultural perceptions, and natural environments on historical events
 - E. Discuss the ways in which factors such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, region, and religion influence historical narratives

HISTORICAL THINKING

- II. (Recognize the past-ness of the past)
 - A. Explain how people have existed, acted, and thought in the past
 - B. Explain what influence the past has on the present
- III. (Emphasize the complex nature of past experiences)
 - A. Interpret the complexity and diversity of situations, events, and past mentalities
 - B. Compare eras and regions in order to define enduring issues
- IV. (Emphasis the complex and problematic nature of the historical record)
 - A. Recognize a range of viewpoints
 - B. Compare competing historical narratives
 - C. Challenge arguments of historical inevitability
 - D. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation

HISTORICAL SKILLS

- V. (Develop skills in critical thinking and reading)
 - A. Evaluate debates among historians
 - B. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations
 - C. Assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources
- VI. (Develop research skills)
 - A. Formulate historical questions
 - B. Obtain historical data from a variety of sources
 - C. Identify gaps in available records
- VII. (Develop the ability to construct reasonable historical arguments)
 - A. Construct a well-organized historical argument
 - B. Support an interpretation with historical evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources