

Teaching on the Fringe: Perspectives from a Virginia Jail

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Like many graduate students, I frequently contemplate my future career. So it was with particular gratitude that I read the articles about career prospects by Nicholas Sarantakes and Brian Etheridge in the January 2015 issue of *Passport*. It was not surprising that both discussed the need for students to look beyond the traditional career path of academia; I have heard that advice since starting graduate school. Though different sources point to a variety of reasons for the scarcity of traditional jobs, most generally agree that current students should keep all their options open as they seek employment.¹

I took the advice to look for work beyond academia seriously and started early on my path to explore different historically oriented avenues. I found what I least expected: a job teaching in jail. Also unexpected: I truly enjoy it. Like other classrooms, mine is filled with students who have their own personal strengths and weaknesses and, of course, their own particular quirks. However, as much as I enjoy teaching in this unique context, I am often dismayed at how ill-equipped I am to make the practical uses of history tangible.

My classroom experience relates to a question asked at this summer's annual SHAFR conference. An audience member at the Comparing America's Wars Roundtable asked, in a nutshell, how historians can be more effective. She was referencing the efficacy of historians who work with students from the mid-to-upper levels of society, but it is a question that works at all levels—even for the students sitting in jail who represent the far end of the relevance-of-history spectrum that is sometimes forgotten. As careers move farther away from the traditional center of academia, perhaps even to the fringe, I think this question becomes even more important. I also believe SHAFR has a compelling opportunity to change the way history resonates in arenas outside of traditional academia and the way those with history degrees make use of them. There is at least one way to do this.

Both Sarantakes and Etheridge suggest that SHAFR broaden the scope of historical application. This is a fabulous start. For this endeavor to fully succeed, however, I think that a more fundamental shift needs to accompany it. This shift centers on the way history departments train students to think about their professional roles. Currently, the bulk of training received in graduate school gears students towards striving to become experts in their areas of research. They learn valuable techniques about how best to insert themselves as experts—along with their work—into the larger academic circuit. But this may be the wrong approach when it comes to selling history outside of the academy. In general, many of my students have no interest in the next big “turn” or in the revisions and post-revisions of research. They want and need resources that can materially affect the course of their lives. They are not just asking to borrow my knowledge. They are asking for the tools and resources to create their own useable information.

Because so many of the students I teach are focused on basic survival, useable history must somehow connect to their immediate needs. The best role for a historian in alternative settings such as this might therefore be that of collaborator in as opposed to dispenser of knowledge. Collaboration suggests a greater focus on the students'

needs and requires a different set of soft skills, a different way of thinking about pedagogy, and a different way of thinking about one's role in the transmission of history. If SHAFR members are going to commit to helping students find meaningful gainful employment, I would urge them to provide information not just on how students get jobs outside of the academy, but on how future graduates can reshape their roles in fundamentally different ways.

Rethinking the historian's role also requires recasting the student's role in a way that fully embraces and incorporates his or her skill set, knowledge, and expertise in the production of history. At first, such a prospect conjures up visions of wild interpretations, the unsuitable use of sources, and general pandemonium. However, these visions rest on assumptions about student inexperience and lack of expertise that the traditional expert-nonexpert divide found in academia perpetuates. But lack of expertise in history does not preclude expertise in other areas. Working as collaborators, the student and the teacher can carefully shepherd a student's outside knowledge into a more productive historical framework that enables the student to share that knowledge in a way that helps set and drive the research agenda. Such a collaborative relationship could prove a valuable way of informing diverse interpretations of the past. More important, using the student's own expertise and knowledge and making the student a partner in the process makes history more accessible and its lessons more effective in a way the expert-nonexpert division does not.

Such a partnership may sound unsettling, but this is where SHAFR can step in to quell concerns. SHAFR members can provide guidance on the best ways to govern the challenges and potential pitfalls that such a drastic reorientation of history would entail. SHAFR itself may prove the best forum for ideas about how to acknowledge and incorporate student expertise in a sincere way. The organization could create a committee like the ones for secondary teachers and public historians that Sarantakes calls for in his article. But such a committee could provide much more than information on how to get a job. Rather than focus on how to sell the historian, it could foster intense discussions about selling history differently. Ultimately, sharing the role of expert may be one important means of answering that haunting question of how to increase historians' efficacy.

Developing a successful approach to this problem presents an important challenge. I am hopeful that SHAFR can help its most junior members as it mulls over its own future and the kinds of services it can provide. If teaching on the fringe, wherever that might be, is to be a viable option for students graduating with history degrees, much more needs to be done on splicing together the needs of the community and needs of the historian. The relationship between the two could be a vibrant one in the future if it is nurtured appropriately in the present.

Note:

1. Allen Mikaelian, “The Academic Job Market's Jagged Line: Number of Ads Placed Drops for Second Year,” *Perspectives in History* 52 (2014), reinforces this suggestion with a report that history jobs marketed with the AHA were down seven percent in September 2014.