From Professor Jacqueline Jones, Chair, Department of History

To our History majors,

“The challenge for faculty in the department is to educate and reassure parents—and you—about the explicit connections between a liberal-arts education and a productive life (of gainful employment) after graduation. My colleagues and I take this challenge seriously; we have for quite a while. In the classroom we want you to learn not only substance, but also (if we are doing our job) how to write well and think critically. We aim to teach you how to put ideas and events into context, and in the process “think like an historian.” We want to prepare you to engage with a 21st Century world, and to appreciate the fact that you will be qualified to do an impressive range of jobs.

Don’t take our word for it. Testimonials from liberal-arts majors, and history majors in particular, show that this kind of education has prepared students for careers in an impressive array of different fields. You have probably heard that Bobby and Sherri Patton of Fort Worth recently gave a $20 million gift to the College of Liberal Arts (https://news.utexas.edu/2016/09/28/20-million-patton-gift-to-boost-liberal-arts-0). In a recent interview, Mr. Patton, a UT Plan II major and now an oil and gas investor, said that he would recommend that a student major in history today: “History gives us the benefit of hindsight; we learn lessons from the past that can be applied today. We can learn from our mistakes. It is something you can apply throughout your life....You can’t just state something and say that it’s true. That’s why you read history and literature — you read to support your arguments, otherwise it’s just conjecture.” He added that the study of liberal arts “teaches us to be more than followers, to be more than a bunch of lemmings. It teaches us how to think.”

Those alums who have gone on to use their history degree in various and creative ways are the most effective and forcefully advocates for the tangible benefits of this major. Therefore the department has inaugurated a “What History Majors Do” page to profile recent graduates and their career choices. (https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/history/undergraduate/majors-achieve.php)

Our annual commencement in May features someone who was a history major; last year Shaka Smart, coach of the UT men’s basketball team, addressed the graduates. To catch the eye of students taking classes in Garrison, we have placed throughout the building posters of famous history majors—Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Katherine Hepburn, Julia Child, W. E. B. Dubois, and Franklin D. Roosevelt among them. We also plan to sponsor panels of history alums who can tell their own stories, and in the process link the history major to career options after college.

As faculty members we encourage you to understand and appreciate the skills you learn in our classes—the ability to digest large amounts of information and organize a short paper or a large research project; evaluate different kinds of evidence; make an argument; document sources; put facts into a larger context; and write in a clear, jargon-less, accessible way. These are skills prized by many different kinds of employers.

The College of Liberal Arts (CoLA) is launching a new initiative related to career preparation for Humanities graduates. Called “Frontiers,” this initiative aims to help students find and pursue academic enrichment opportunities outside of the classroom that can enhance their skills, confidence, and knowledge of the world. Frontiers is made up of four areas: Leadership, Undergraduate Research, Study Abroad and Internships, and Career Planning. According to CoLA, “Students can prepare for the workplace, graduate school, law school, medical school or any other area they plan to pursue following graduation by participating in one or more of the Frontiers programs. And for students who aren’t quite sure which path to take after college, it’s a great tool to discover what they’re really passionate about.” http://liberalarts.utexas.edu/student-affairs/frontiers/