



Why study history? An examination of undergraduate students' notions and perceptions about history

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ABSTRACT: History was once prized in public education but, over time, has slowly fallen to the fringes of the curriculum. Many institutions have struggled to solicit and maintain student interest in history majors and many students merely take “history” as a general education or liberal arts elective. The reasons explored here for why students should study history are myriad and include acquiring knowledge and critical thinking skills, developing citizenship, and providing “lessons” for the present. The literature on “Why Study History?” almost exclusively focuses on secondary education resulting in a gap in the literature exploring students’ attitudes and beliefs about the subject. This article examines a sample of 26 undergraduate students’ notions and perceptions about history through a survey questionnaire and open-ended questions. The most significant themes were “Lessons of History” and “History has Questionable Value.” The findings are discussed within the conceptual frameworks of McNeill (1985) and Stearns (1998). Recommendations for future research are also explored.

KEYWORDS: Why study history; purpose of history; citizenship; distance learning; history education; social studies education

“Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history”
—Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 1, 1862

“There is nothing to be learned from history any more. We’re in science fiction now.”
—Allen Ginsberg, qtd. in *After the Wake* (1980)

Introduction

A feature titled, “Major Renovations: Reviving Undergraduate History at Sam Houston State University” ran in the November 2017 edition of the American Historical Association’s *Perspectives on History*. The author, Brian Domitrovic, was former Chair of the history department and, coincidentally, my former professor who served as an examiner on my comprehensive committee. The challenge that Sam Houston State University (USA) experienced was one felt by history departments across the country—a noticeable decline in history majors. But the tide could shift back in their favor, they imagined, if they “engaged their [students’] sheer fascination with history” (para. 5). The key Domitrovic and his colleagues in the history department found was connecting with “students at their level of [historical] interest” and showing, rather than telling, why history is a worthy academic pursuit (para. 13). By

PLEASE CITE AS: Berg, C. W. (2019). Why study history? An examination of undergraduate students’ notions and perceptions about history. *Historical Encounters: A journal of historical consciousness, historical cultures, and history education*, 6(1), 54-71.

opening lines of communication and dialogue through public outreach, redefining history education, and recalibrating the department to align with evolving student interests and needs led to increased enrollment figures. “It’s a great time to be involved in a history department,” Domitrovic observed, “because there is a beautiful problem to solve: how to restore history to its rightful, sturdy position among majors at our many institutions of higher learning” (para. 15).

Concern about one institution’s enrollment figures is, in and of itself, unremarkable, but, in the above case, it is symptomatic of a larger problem—what value does history hold for twenty-first-century students? This question—why study history?—is not new nor is it unique to the United States. The study of history can be contentious and controversial, and, in a postmodern age, historical matters are of the greatest importance as they infiltrate every nook and cranny of public and private life (Evans, 2009; MacIntyre, Clark, & Mason, 2004; Taylor & Guyver, 2012). History matters but it is our duty and obligation to make the merits and virtues of historical study accessible to students today. The problem is that history has slowly moved to the periphery of the curriculum and, in many cases, is no longer a general education college requirement. In some cases, history is listed as an elective and, often, a course in history is not required for a college degree (Anderson, 2016; Belkin, 2014; Markowicz, 2017). This trend is alarming because, as Sam Wineburg argued in *Why Learn History? (When it’s Already on Your Phone)* (2018), critical thinking is conspicuously absent “in our Google-drenched society” where information is passively accepted with a click rather than investigated or questioned (p. 3). The purpose of this article is to consider the scholarship on “why study history?” and explore the beliefs and notions of a sample of undergraduate history students in light of the literature.

The research questions that guided this study were:

Q1: What learning outcomes or skills do students value in a historical education?

Q2: How does studying history facilitate effective citizenship?

Conceptual framework

The American Historical Association (AHA) commissioned two recognized historians to ponder and reflect on why history is a viable course of study and a useful apparatus for the public good. So profound and timely were their explorations on the subject that they have been archived on the AHA’s website and are readily accessible through a general Google search. William McNeill’s (1985) and Peter Stearns’ (1998) frameworks illustrate two complementary perspectives. There is some overlap in how each historian categorizes their choices in each respective framework, e.g., “collective identity” and “provides identity,” and “historical understanding” and “moral understanding,” but, there are subtle differences in phrasing leading to different emphases (micro- versus macro-historical scales, for example) and, potentially, different conclusions and interpretations. Taken together, these frameworks provide a well-rounded lens for analyzing and understanding scholars’ and students’ justifications and rationales for studying history. Table 1 provides a side-by-side comparison of both frameworks.

Literature review

The documentation used in this review was retrieved from specific searches of JSTOR, SAGE, and Taylor & Francis databases as they house journals dedicated to history and social studies education. Several articles were accessed via Inter-Library Loan. A general Google search was conducted for any open access articles that might be available but, unfortunately, none were located. Descriptors and key phrases used in database searches included “why study history,” “purpose of history,” “why history,” and “study history.” Two seminal texts that have become

classics in the philosophy of history are R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946) and E. H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961). A discussion on the methods, purpose, and rationales for studying history would be incomplete without their consideration.

McNeill (1985)	Stearns (1998)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collective memory 2. Historical knowledge and understanding 3. Level I: Personal-local 4. Level II: National History 5. Level III: Global <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical wisdom • History for its own sake • Novice to Expert 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand people/societies importance in our own lives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History is beautiful • Storytelling • Reconstruct the past 2. Moral understanding 3. Provides identity 4. Essential for good citizenship 5. Skill acquisition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess evidence • Assess conflicting interpretations • Experience in assessing past examples of change 6. Transferable skills

Table 1. McNeill-Stearns Framework

The American context: History, the Social Studies, and the politicization of history

Within the American context, the literature on why one should study history can be traced back to the 1930s, often, following national crises, such as the post-Depression, World War II, and the Vietnam War (Berg & Christou, 2017). The literature, especially from the mid- and late-twentieth century, reveals that much of the debate concerned justifying the study of history against its nemesis, the social studies, and reaffirming history's preeminence in the public-school curriculum (Berg & Christou, 2017; Evans, 2006; 2009; Kreider, 1937). The debate between history and the social studies has spilled over into the political arena and the court of public opinion. History's purpose and substance is no longer a purely academic question relating to classroom studies; rather, a firm understanding of history is deemed essential in deciphering political discourse on the misappropriation of history by private interests, redefining what history is for political purposes, and the threat they pose to public education (Loewen, 2007; 2009; Wineburg, 2018).

Textbook controversies accompanied the History Wars in the United States since the infamous Rugg controversy in the 1930s (Evans, 2006). History textbooks have garnered more critical attention in recent years (Lee, 2013; Loewen, 2009; Martell & Hashimoto, 2012; Percy, 2011). Two influential studies, Anyon's *Ideology and United States History Textbooks* (1979) and Apple's *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (1993), revealed the ideological framing and influence of American history textbooks. Several significant studies followed Anyon's and Apple's lead and found the inescapable influence of ideology (Neumann, 2012; Roberts, 2014), political propaganda (Lachmann & Mitchell, 2014), and corporate influence (Neumann, 2014) has continued unabated in the content of history

textbooks. Some critics have called for the removal of textbooks from the history curriculum. The language used in the titles of two of Loewen's popular books - *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (2007), and *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited about Doing History Again* (2009) - are an overt attempt to politicize the flawed content of history textbooks and create a grassroots movement for their removal.

In recent years, organizations such as the American Historical Association (AHA) have made a concerted effort to address the importance and value of history as a school subject and in practical life (McNeill, 1985; Stearns, 1998). Because the debate has taken on a significant political dimension, understanding the purpose of history as a school subject and as a means for living a good life have become more important. "Strange that an activity [history] receiving such broad recognition as being fundamental should need such constant buttressing!" (Nicoll, 1969, p. 193). In recent years, educational governing bodies began recognizing the significance of primary sources in history and social studies education by establishing historical thinking benchmarks (NCSS, 2013) and Common Core literacy standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) directly tied to exploring historical documents.

Virtues of historical study

Scholars have written widely on the various attributes and factors they feel make history a worthy subject of study as well as hindrances to untapping history's potential. One reason most scholars agree on is the importance of history for promoting citizenship (Bentley, 2007; Fumat, 1997; McCully, 1978; Stricker, 1992). Cultivating and promoting an ethical and moral system, whether as an individual or a corporate member of society, is another reason to study history (Bentley, 2007; Andress, 1997; Kreider, 1937). The study of history as a means for providing relevance in the present was noted in much of the literature (Carr, 1961; Gray, 2005; Nicoll, 1969; Teaford, 1971) as was history's ability to teach students lessons (Durant, 2014; Glassie, 1992; Stricker, 1994) or analogies to "illuminate the present and guide the future" (Andress, 1997, p. 312).

History is an effective mechanism for promoting personal and collective/national identity (Bohnstedt, 1971; Low, 1948; Hunt, 2011; McCully, 1978). Collingwood (1946) observed that "history is 'for' human self-knowledge" (p. 10) and cultivating and nurturing good judgment, understanding, and wisdom are a natural outcome of studying the past (Bentley, 2007; Kreider, 1937; Sloan, 1993). The revelatory outcome Collingwood noted requires an "imaginative understanding," as Carr (1961) described it, of the historical past (p. 20). "History cannot be written," Carr concludes, "unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing" (p. 21). The study of the past should help us to live better in the present and prepare for the future: "The function of the historian [or student of history] is...to master and understand it [history] as the key to the understanding of the present" (p. 29). The pinnacle of historical inquiry is "when [our] vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present" (Carr, 1961, p. 44).

What is more, a student's creative center—their imagination—is exercised as they engage in historical study (Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1946; Low, 1948; McCully, 1978; Teaford, 1971). As the medievalist Norman Cantor (1967) observed, "history is worth studying because it is a creative act" that "demands...the exercise of a creative imagination" (p. 3). The study of history is also fun, providing a sophisticated venue for entertainment (Glassie, 1992; Kreider, 1937; Teaford, 1971). And, as many scholars argued, history is worthy of study for its own sake (Bohnstedt, 1971; Gray, 2005; Sloan, 1993).

Barriers to history

Teaching methods and curricular choices have long been identified by many scholars as barriers to the study of history (Collingwood, 1946). While there are exemplars of good history teaching (Hunt, 2011), the literature suggests that history teaching is problematic (Berg & Christou, 2017). The emphasis upon rote memorization of dates and facts have led many to conclude that history has little practical value outside of test-taking (Durant, 2014; Nicoll, 1969). A secondary, but no less important, barrier is the history academy. Teaford (1971) recognized that today's students are tomorrow's leaders and failing to inspire and model the merits of historical study in meaningful ways only alienates an educated citizenry (Wineburg, 1991; 2018).

While historical organizations, such as the AHA, have heeded Teaford's ominous warning by establishing collaborative partnerships with teacher-training programs throughout the United States, and government-sponsored initiatives, such as the discontinued Teaching American History grant program providing professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers, we are in jeopardy of, once again, sliding into a position of complacency and indifference (Berg & Christou, 2017; Ragland, 2015). This is especially the case in higher education where, as Nicoll (1969) observed, "the professor in the school of higher learning...has a significant place in the scheme" of promoting historical appreciation and literacy (p. 244).

According to Nicoll (1969), instructors and professors alike are "indispensable" (p. 244) as gatekeepers of historical knowledge, entrusted with unpacking the historical past in a way that resonates with today's student that, hopefully, extends beyond their time in the classroom (Fogo, 2015; Hong & Hamot, 2015; Levy, 2016). A third barrier is the Internet and its ubiquitous role in teaching and learning today (Wineburg, 2018). With information only a click away, students are confronted with an overwhelming amount of information but lack the critical thinking apparatus to distinguish credible from questionable sources. "The Internet...presents challenges so daunting," Wineburg (2018) argues, "that...it can spin trained historians in circles and make talented undergraduates look downright silly" (p. 175).

There is a gap in the literature looking at the higher education (post-secondary) setting and why students should study history. The majority of the studies examined in this review pertained to secondary education (grades 6-12) in the United States with only a few that considered the higher education context (college/university). Furthermore, while there were some studies that explored student perspectives from a secondary education perspective there are no studies that this author is aware of exploring higher education students' perspectives of why they should study history. In order to become effective history teachers and empower an educated citizenry to see the value of history in and outside of the classroom, we must understand the evolving needs of our audience.

Methods

A qualitative design was used to explore the experiences and perspectives of college students through an anonymous survey. Several questions of the survey collected background data on respondents. Building on the contextual data gleaned from respondents' background, the remaining questions explored student perceptions and understanding of the value of history in and outside of the classroom. Response data were analyzed and thematized using the McNeill-Stearns framework on "Why study history?" listed in Table 1. Survey data and open-ended questions were used to "provide meaningful additional detail to help make sense out of and interpret survey results" (Patton, 2014, p. 230). The questions used in the survey were field-tested by five experts in the fields of history, history education, and social studies education.

The survey consisted of eleven questions. The first six questions (Q) of the survey requested background data on respondents, such as how many online courses have been taken, gender, age, traditional or non-traditional (adult) student, and current year in college. The last five were semi-structured, and open-ended:

Q7: What comes to mind when you think of "History?"

Q8: To what extent does knowing history play a role (e.g. as a frame of reference) in everyday life (when you watch the news, meet new people, encounter new experiences)? Likert scale response.

Q9: Why should we (i.e., human beings) study history? What benefit(s) do we gain, if any?

Q10: Does the study of "History" prepare you for citizenship? If so, how?

Q11: What value does the study of "History" hold for you: a) in your studies? Please explain.; b) in your personal life? Likert scale response. Please explain.

Setting and procedures

Participants were drawn from two public state colleges in the southeastern United States. These institutions grant associate and bachelor's degrees and serve approximately 50,000 students on-ground and online. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received from both institutions before students were recruited in July 2018. The IRB boards approved the recruitment letter used as a Canvas (the learning management system) course announcement and the form of an incentive to interested participants—ten bonus points applied to a discussion forum of their choosing.

The recruitment sites were chosen because of the diversity and representation of online students in the region as well as using my own classroom to conduct the surveys. The survey was administered using SurveyMonkey. The Canvas course announcement of the recruitment letter was posted in the following four online course sections in July 2018: one section of "U.S. history until 1865" and three sections of "History of World Civilizations, ca. 1815-Present" were sampled. These were all general survey courses and met the general education requirements from both institutions. The U.S. history survey had approximately 30 students enrolled whereas the rest had approximately 25 students for an approximate total of 80 initially-registered students with a 32.5% response rate. The survey was closed during mid-July 2018.

Findings and discussion

For students to be considered for this study, they had to meet the following criteria: are 18 years of age or older, affirmed Informed Consent, and participated in at least one online course. When reviewing the data, one respondent's responses were duplicated and only the first series of responses were included in data analysis. All responses, aside from the duplication, were used as data in the analysis stage.

What comes to mind when you think of "History?"

Student responses to this question were scattered. The most responses ($n = 6$) were themed as the "Distant/Remote Past." Responses ranged from "old times" to "the past." The themes of "Peoples/Cultures" ($n = 3$), "Great Man Theory" ($n = 2$), and "Miscellaneous" ($n = 4$) did not reveal any substantive content and were often generic or one-word responses, such as Student 1's "storytelling" and Student 16's "wars." The majority of students did not touch on factors discussed in the literature or reference concepts from McNeill's (1985) or Stearns' (1998) frameworks.

Traditional history

One interesting, but minor, finding was the theme of “Traditional History” ($n = 2$) where Student 14 noted “long readings” and Student 15 commented “dates, people, events, knowledge” as representative of “history.” Traditional history has been the source of considerable scholarly critique and debate and is often seen as a barrier to good history teaching (Berg & Christou, 2017; Martell, 2013; Schul, 2015; Virgin, 2014). Pulitzer-prize winning author Will Durant (2014) eloquently argued:

History as it is typically studied in schools—history as a dreary succession of dates and kings, of politics and wars, of the rise and fall of states—this kind of history is verily weariness of the flesh, stale and flat and unprofitable. No wonder so few students in school are drawn to it; no wonder so few of us learn any lessons from the past. (p. 156).

Lessons of history

Several students touched on “Lessons of History” ($n = 3$) as well as “Relevance” ($n = 3$) and “Historical Understanding” ($n = 3$). These three themes corroborate those found in the literature. Further, student responses tended to be more developed; for example, Student 3 said “Usually WWII is the first thing that comes to mind, but also just life in general from the past, and how much it’s changed now.” When some students thought about “history,” they often thought about how history is a tool for learning from past experiences and/or mistakes and learning from them (Andress, 1997; Durant, 1968/2010; Glassie, 1994; Stricker, 1992). A few students observed that the purpose of the past is to inform the present (Carr, 1961; Gray, 2005; Nicoll, 1969). As Student 6 offered, “When I think of the word “History,” I think of past events that affected my present-day life” or, as Student 8 shared, “things that make us who we are today.” For these students, history’s purpose is to help them better understand the world they live in and prepare for the future (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Sheehan, 2011). This finding aligns with a national online survey facilitated by the Historical Association (UK) which queried 544 teachers about a proposed revision of the national curriculum and a shared concern amongst many respondents was the relevance of material for students (Harris & Burn, 2016). Teachers are interested in making history accessible and students, as this present study illustrates, are interested in learning the means for appropriating history in relevant ways (Schul, 2015). A few responses hinted at historical understanding, but one student showed mature historical reasoning: when they thought of “History,” they thought about “everything in the past that has contributed to the Earth and how it has evolved” (Student 9). Though each response themed as “Historical Understanding” varied in its language, each of the responses demonstrated a heightened sense of historical consciousness (Bentley, 2007; Carr, 1961; McNeill, 1985; Stearns, 1998).

Here, it is important to clarify certain terms that are commonplace in history education: historical thinking, historical understanding, and historical consciousness. Laville (2004) suggests that historical thinking “is a set of thought processes and attitudes, that taken together, recreate the intellectual apparatus of the historian” (p. 173). Historical understanding, meanwhile, is the process by which meaning and value are discovered and extracted from a given historical artefact and are contextualized within the larger historical narrative (Laville, 2004). The term “historical consciousness,” however, has a “diversity of conceptual usages” that are influenced by academic traditions and national contexts (Körber, 2016, p. 442). Seixas (2006) could not “imagine a better definition” than the following: “the intersection among public memory, citizenship, and history education” (p. 15). A broader definition is provided by Wineburg (2007) and his colleagues who suggest historical consciousness is a result “of a complex interplay between home, community, school, and the historicizing forces of popular culture” (Wineburg, Mosberg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007, p. 44). We should seek to better understand these various strands of historical consciousness rather than try to oversimplify them

in a quest to neatly define the concept in universal terms, according to Körber (2016). In North America, for example, historical consciousness diverges from its German counterpart:

Anglo-Saxon research and discussion about history teaching, however, is not based so strongly on a complex theoretical concept as the German historical consciousness, but is rather pragmatically focused on different aspects of student's own historical thinking and on the question of progression in historical learning. (Körber, 2016, p. 444).

What Körber (2016) is describing above is a concept articulated by Wineburg (2001) in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, as "mature historical thought" (p. 5), "mature historical understanding" (p. 7) and "mature historical knowing" (p. 24). "Achieving mature historical thought," Wineburg concludes, "depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past" (p. 5).

To what extent does knowing history play a role (e.g. as a frame of reference) in everyday life (when you watch the news, meet new people, encounter new experiences)?

This question was framed as a five-point Likert scale ranging from "none at all" at one end, to a great deal" at the other end. The responses were evenly distributed between "a great deal" ($n = 13$) and "a lot" ($n = 13$).

Relevance

All responses heavily acknowledged history's pivotal role in everyday life. Stricker (1992) argued that "the value of historical study must be an enduring question..." and the findings in this study support that claim (p. 293). Responses recognized the importance of history in everyday life, because, as Gray (2005) concluded, "knowledge of the past is an essential part of our attempts to understand the present" (p. 155). The relationship between the "present" and the "past" is reciprocal, according to Carr (1961), because "the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past" (p. 69). The data suggest that knowledge of history is a practical asset in twenty-first-century living.

Why should we (i.e., human beings) study history? What benefit(s) do we gain, if any?

Lessons of history

In response to this question, respondents ($n = 13$) believed that history's primary benefit was providing lessons for living in the present. Student responses evidenced patterns in specific key words, such as "learn", which was used seven times, and "mistakes," which was cited ten times. Several responses transcended simple classification and were cross-listed, as appropriate. For example, Student 22 commented, "We study history to learn from the past to help shape the future and to have an understanding of self and where the society is coming from." This response was themed under "Self-Knowledge" and "Lessons of History." The data revealed that students found the theme of "Lessons of History" to be the most powerful benefit and rationale for studying history. This finding aligns with the literature (Andress, 1997; Carr, 1961; Rösen, 2004; 2007). But, as one scholar has noted, gleaning lessons from the past can be problematic: "The search for lessons from history is almost as frustrating a task as seeking to find the Holy Grail or Camelot" (Gray, 2005, p. 156). Teachers should be mindful of the potential pitfalls and unforeseen challenges associated with using the past as an interpretive matrix or model for meaning-making in the present. Rösen's (2004; 2007) "disciplinary matrix" is arguably the most promising model, as Retz (2015) argued, for exploring traditional historical consciousness, with its comprehensive set of criteria. The complexity and focus of the model coupled with theoretical rigor and scientific presuppositions might put it out of reach of ordinary college instructors who require a model that is accessible and

user-friendly (Berg, 2017). Promoting disciplined historical thinking and developing a conscious recognition of the threat of presentism are two strategies for applying historical lessons in context (Counsell, 2004; Fogo, 2015; Lowenthal, 2000).

Does the study of “History” prepare you for citizenship? If so, how?

Stearns' (1998) conceptual framework draws attention to the role history plays in fostering and sustaining citizenship. Responses from the survey, however, were a mixture revealing a diversity of beliefs about history's connection to facilitating citizenship. A considerable portion of responses ($n = 11$) agreed that history plays a role in effecting citizenship. Several responses ($n = 5$) misunderstood the question and a percentage ($n = 4$) provided neither a direct “yes” or “no” to the question. Three responses used the phraseology “in a way...” to preface their remarks, while two respondents believed that history did not produce tangible results in citizenship and another response was uncertain.

History promotes active and engaged citizenship

One sophisticated response provided contextualization and a rationale for history's communicative power relative to citizenship:

The study of history does prepare me for citizenship because history taught me a lot about what it means to be a good citizen. For example, woman [sic] back then couldn't vote, but now woman [sic] can. This shows me I should never be lazy when voting—that I always should because woman [sic] back then fought for the right for me to vote. (Student 6).

Like Student 6, another showed a remarkable grasp of the interconnectedness of citizenship and historical consciousness: “Yes, history prepares us to learn more about the past in the country we live in,” Student 16 reflected, but, more importantly, “Citizens understand that we are a product of a past but, at the same time, that we are building, from the present, our future.” A deeper understanding of the interplay between historical study and citizenship, according to Hunt (2001), is important because “If students are to mature into citizens, they need to know their past...” (p. 263). Our understanding of the relationship between citizenship and historical consciousness, however, remains unexplored and undertheorized in North American contexts, e.g., the United States (Seixas, 2016). Seixas (2016) attributes this to a possible incompatibility between the positionalities of German and Anglophone historical consciousness. In response to Seixas' (2016) claim, Körber (2016) argued that variants of historical consciousness are peculiar to certain academic traditions, linguistics, and national contexts. These different incarnations reveal, rather than obscure, emergent historical consciousness in diverse settings.

The scholarly literature is filled with admonitions for historical instruction to inculcate effective citizenship training (Bentley, 2007; Fumat, 1997; Teaford, 1973). “What should concern us more than the failure of school history,” McCully (1978) warned, “is the failure of schools to educate and civilize our children” (p. 499). The primary function of history instruction, for many scholars, is the development of engaged and educated citizens. Nicoll (1969) concurred, noting, “Most Americans know that the goal of teaching history in our schools is ‘the good citizen’” (p. 193). A “good citizen” is a desirable consequence of a good historical education, Nicoll believed, but how should we define or recognize such an individual? One suggestion, offered by Bohnstedt (1971), describes the culmination of a sound historical education leading to the individual becoming a “Sophisticated thinker and citizen—a truly educated person” (p. 65). The findings suggest that a notable percentage of respondents believed there was a connection between studying history and citizenship, while a significant percentage were less certain of that relationship or misunderstood the question altogether.

What value does the study of “History” hold for you in your studies? Please explain.

This question, made up of Likert scale responses and elaborations on those initial Likert responses, considered the value of history in students' education, in general. A five-point Likert scale ranging from “none at all” at one end to “a great deal” at the other end was used. Close to half of the responses noted “a great deal” ($n = 7$) and “a lot” ($n = 5$) relative to value but the largest claim among respondents was “a moderate amount” in terms of the value that history provided them ($n = 9$). A smaller percentage observed that historical study provided “a little” ($n = 4$) value and one response noted “none at all.” Themes included lessons of history and history has questionable value with associated themes of understanding, relevance, and perspective.

Lessons of history

A significant number of responses ($n = 10$) demonstrated the power of learning lessons from the past and their value in the present. Many of these lessons, too, were professionally relevant for students outside of history, including students studying criminal justice, public management, and nursing. Student 24, for instance, said, “It helps me greatly because it will tell me things that I never knew happened to law enforcement or criminal justice at those different times” and “In my criminal classes, it is good to know the background of criminalities in my region and others” (Student 19). Several students who were in the medical field commented that the study of history was valuable to their understanding of medical developments over time. “I love learning about the past and the events that have brought us to where we are now,” noted Student 15. They continued: “Medicine itself has a fascinating history which has taught us many things over the centuries”. The applications include emergency management and disaster planning, as Student 17 argued, “emergency management involves learning a lot from past disasters and how to prepare better.” The literature contends that history is essential to educated citizens from all walks of life and the eclectic responses to this question confirm that lessons can be culled from all forms of life experience (Kreider, 1937; McCully, 1978). One of history's myriad purposes, therefore, is “for the development of a well-balanced individual” (Low, 1948, p. 271).

History has questionable value

This was a significant finding as a good portion of responses ($n = 6$) saw little practical value in the study of history for their chosen major and/or profession. Several responses were apathetic towards the value of history for their studies. One student, who was a marketing major, felt history provided no real value, arguing, “I do not feel like I need to study history...” (Student 10). Similarly, Student 6 agreed, noting, “In my studies, I don't really see history affecting it that much.” Some responses noted the benefits of knowing certain aspects of history, such as Student 20, who observed, “I will need to know certain times when antiseptic techniques were started, but not much” while others derived a passing degree of amusement: “I find it interesting to learn about the past, but I do not feel like it is higher in my studies” (Student 12).

In the “Lessons of History” theme, several students found history applicable and, arguably, necessary to their studies (e.g., criminal justice, medicine, and public administration) but several of their peers in the present study found history's value questionable (Students 12 and 20) or nonexistent (Students 3, 6, 9, and 10). The findings of “History has Questionable Value” theme contrast sharply with the literature which argues that historical study can help students refine their critical thinking skills (Bentley, 2007; Glassie, 1994; Low, 1948), deepen disciplinary literacy (Bain, 2012; Girard & Harris, 2012), stimulate their creative energies and imaginations (Collingwood, 1946; Carr, 1961), acquire transferable skills (Kreider, 1937), and improve their communication (Sloan, 1993) and reading and writing skills (Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012; Monte-Sano, 2011; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). Historical study provides

substantial practical benefits to students that extend beyond the history classroom into other disciplines and everyday life.

What value does the study of “History” hold for you in your personal life?

Themes included history facilitates personal identity and growth, learning history provides relevance and entertainment, and, lastly, history has questionable value.

History facilitates personal identity and growth

Half of all responses ($n = 13$) identified personal connections or interest and identity as valuable benefits in their everyday lives. One student explained the personal significance of understanding specific wars to know more about their family history: “I have relatives who have fought in war and knowing the demographics of where they were and what was going on during that time is important to me” (Student 14). Student 15 found similar value for making sense of their identity, remarking, “It teaches me about where I come from, and creates connections to the past.” Student 22, on the contrary, was candid when they shared how history shapes their evolving understanding of personal identity through the lens of race:

History in my personal life as a biracial person plays a huge factor. By learning about the past history of my family it's interesting because before I was born the different sides of my family hated each other because of there [sic] physical differences. After learning that I don't take anything for granted.

The data support the scholarly literature on the connections between historical study and increasing levels of identity and personal growth. Bentley (2007) persuasively argued that the study of history “enables human beings to understand themselves and their place in the world” (para 2) while Fumat (1997) claimed that historical study led to “a better, more controlled, understanding of his [sic] own culture” (p. 158). “Students should be introduced to the study of history,” McCully (1978) suggested, “by introducing them to the empirical study of their own experiences, of their immediate, personal interest” (p. 501). History is important, but it takes on new significance when viewed through a personal lens.

Learning history provides entertainment and relevance

Several responses ($n = 6$) saw value in studying history as a means for providing enjoyment, entertainment, and relevance. Student 9 revealed, “I enjoy learning about history and what has happened throughout history. It intrigues me and I always catch myself researching past events.” Relatedly, Student 8 observed, “I like to learn about history very much and would look up certain things and where it started and where it came from.” One effusive response confessed, “I just really enjoy learning about history.” The literature confirms the connection between historical study and its entertainment value (Glassie, 1994; Kreider, 1937). Teaford (1973) likened historical study to detective work reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes (p. 168). The study of history, Teaford continued, is dynamic: “Despite its human shortcomings, history can serve a vital role in the modern world, a role aimed both at enlightening and entertaining the vast body of mankind” (p. 165). Though history is often considered a serious and solitary discipline, Glassie (1994) reminds us that “entertainment is not the least of history's purposes” (p. 966). Relevance has been noted by scholars as a significant reason for studying history (Carr, 1961; Gray, 2005; Nicoll, 1969; Teaford, 1973). Student 10 responded, “I like to learn about the past. I feel that it helps you understand why the world is the way it is today.” Another response mirrored those of Student 10, commenting, “I feel history is very interesting. I enjoy learning about previous events that have happened and how we conquered the problems, bringing us to who we are today” (Student 20). These responses demonstrate the value history brings to the

present, because, as one historian argued, “understanding the present is impossible without history” (Stricker, 1992, p. 302).

History has questionable value

A number of responses ($n = 4$) questioned history's significance in their personal lives. Student 12, for instance, remarked, “I don't use history in my everyday life, so I don't feel like it is valued as high for me, but I know that there are some that highly value it and use it.” Even though this student admitted that history held some value, they recognized that others valued it “highly.” Student 13 expressed the same sentiment, noting, “i [sic] think it does play a role but a very minimal role.” One response was specific in history's limited conversational value, saying it held “Small value since i [sic] dont [sic] refer to history very often in regular conversation” (Student 7). This finding is problematic because it is not supported by the general consensus of the findings of this present study nor by the literature (Bentley, 2007; Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1946; Gray, 2005; Hunt, 2011). The scholarly literature is unequivocal in its support of efficacious effects of historical study. Scholars have imagined a world where history was not studied or valued, sometimes in grim terms: “For a world without history is a world of narrow-minded intolerance and stifled imagination. It is a world without knowledge of itself, a world of ignorance” (Teaford, 1973, p. 169). In his book, *The Lessons of History*, Will Durant (1968/2010) and his spouse, Ariel, concluded by offering this haunting, sage, and timeless admonition to future generations:

To those of us who study history not merely as a warning reminder of man's follies and crimes, but also as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls, the past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors; it becomes a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, investors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach and carve and sing...If a man is fortunate he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life. (p. 102).

Conclusions

Historians and students share common conceptions about why we should study history (McNeill, 1985; Stearns, 1998). These include the study of history acting as a change agent in our lives, that is, teaching us life lessons, encouraging active citizenship, learning more about ourselves, who we are, and where we come from, and growing as individuals (Carr, 1961; Glassie, 1994; Stricker, 1992). Several factors discussed in the literature, such as moral understanding, historical imagination, and history for its own sake, for example, did not resonate with students in this study (Bentley, 2007; Bohnstedt, 1971; Collingwood, 1946; Gray, 2005). Students overwhelmingly appreciated history as a means for transmitting past lessons, in relevant ways, to inform the present and guide actions and preparations for the future. The findings of the present study showed an appreciation and recognition of history's purpose in academic and public settings. The literature suggests that history is an excellent teacher inculcating lessons and wisdom from the past but, within the school setting, traditional history could be a potential barrier (Berg & Christou, 2017; Martell, 2013; Virgin, 2014). The study of history enables students to live more purposeful lives through greater self-understanding and personal growth, a finding supported by the literature (Bentley, 2007; McCully, 1978). There is a certain fascination with the past that, according to scholars, is fundamental to the human experience (Carr, 1961; Glassie, 1994; Kreider, 1937). The present study revealed the hidden joys and entertainments modern-day students found in historical study and the enduring value of historical relevance in an increasingly interconnected world.

Though the theme of traditional history was only noted by a handful of respondents, it is a potential barrier to good teaching emphasizing passive, rather than active, learning through rote memorization, which could adversely affect student learning and achievement (Martell, 2014;

Schul, 2014). Another barrier to good history teaching noted in the literature is the rift between the history academy and colleges/faculties of education (Teaford, 1971; Wineburg, 1991; 2018). The Teaching American History grant program, for example, helped address this problem for a time but focused on K-12 professional development opportunities (Berg & Christou, 2017). What about academics in higher education, conversely, who might benefit from pedagogical training to reach an evolving, diverse student body? Then there is the matter of technology in the classroom and the disruptive role of the Internet in accessing information and appropriating it with a prudent eye to credibility and truthfulness (Wineburg, 2018). The implications of ignoring these potential barriers to good history teaching could affect the future health and prosperity of history departments across the country and lead to waning public and student interest. But, more importantly, it would be a disservice to the present generation of students who are deprived of the transformational experience of a historical education. One recurring theme was the questionable value of history as an academic study or for practical living—a finding the literature does not support (Durant, 1968/2010; Hunt, 2011; Sloan, 1993; Teaford, 1973). This troubling finding is cause for concern as a percentage of respondents in this study found history to be of marginal importance. But, as Domitrovic (2017) reminds us, we have a “beautiful problem to solve” so let us make good on this opportunity because our present, and futures, depend on it (para. 15). Recommendations for future research include increasing the sample size and scope by including several institutions from different regions of the United States, surveying on-ground students relative to online students in a replication study, and conducting a comparative, international study examining student attitudes and beliefs about history in competing national contexts.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ted Christou, Karl G. Hammarlund, Katalin Morgan, and Stephen Morillo for kindly reviewing the article at different stages of its development and sharing their expertise as history scholars and teacher-educators. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions for improving the scope and structure of the article.

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