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Bringing the World to a Small Texas Town: Teaching World History at a Rural-Serving University

World history as a teaching field has matured to the point that, rather than asking 'Should we teach world history?,' we now ask questions that assume its validity and necessity are a given. This forum joins dozens of articles published over the last three decades that tackle teaching philosophies employed in the world history classroom. A small sampling of those articles includes Gilbert Allardyce's work published in the very first issue of the *Journal of World History*, a forum on Training Teachers of World History in *Perspectives on History*, as well as a collection of guest-edited essays on Teaching World History from the German Historical Institute here in *World History Connected,* and more.[1] Here, we offer a variety of responses to the question, 'Why do we teach world history?,' some philosophical and others practical. For my part, I would like to reflect from my perspective as a world historian teaching at a small public research university in rural northeast Texas, which may resonate with other educators in rural-serving institutions. I will first give a brief description of our university community, student demographics, and issues of concern to them upon graduation that show areas sometimes pejoratively referred to as 'fly-over country' are actually more vibrant and globally connected than may be apparent on the surface. I will then explore the place of world history when it exists outside of the core curriculum and the potential for world history education in Texas.

Ultimately, I posit that offering robust world history education to students in rural areas can help teachers in training be more inclusive and less Eurocentric in their historical understanding, with the potential to transform instruction in even the smallest school districts. As world historians, we can provide a relevant historical experience for an often overlooked diverse student body, and inspire students to seek an authentic collective identity that transcends regionalism or nationalism. Perhaps most

crucial in this time of increasing social divisions, understanding world history can foster a sense of historical empathy to help students understand what it means to be human.

That Small College Town Life

My university, the third largest in the Texas A&M University System, is situated in the small rural town of Commerce about an hour outside of the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) Metroplex. According to the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), it is one of 1,087 rural-serving colleges in the country.[2] As of Spring 2023, we have a student population of about 10,360 with 6,678 undergraduates and 3,682 graduate students, in a town with a population of only 9,090 as of 2020, making it one of the smallest college towns in the state.

Image 1: Aerial Shot of Texas A&M University – Commerce by Fkbowen, created September 10, 2015. Not shown are the Nursing and Health Sciences Building, opened in 2020, and the east campus with Binnion Hall, Talbot Hall of Languages, and Ferguson Social Science Building. Creative Commons (CC BY-SA-4.0), available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAMUC_Campus.PNG

Commerce is a small, walkable town and most places are within a mile or two but university life and town life are largely separate. Students will occasionally venture out to eat at one of the few restaurants near campus or shop at the local Wal-Mart next to the highway that cuts through town but mostly locals frequent the city square tucked away about half a mile from campus. Every September regional musicians and local crafters set up in the downtown square for a festival that celebrates the Osage orange tree (known locally as the bois d'arc tree) native to the area, important to Osage and Comanche Nations for bows, and to early nineteenth century settlers as livestock hedges. The Bois d'Arc Bash and special events like the recent concert by hip-hop artist,

Flo Rida, are occasions that encourage community interactions as students visit the square downtown or community members attend an event on campus.

Image 2: Racing lawn mowers in the parade at the 32nd Annual Bois d'Arc Bash in Commerce, Texas by Michael Barera, September 23, 2017. Creative Commons (CC BY-SA-4.0) at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2017_Bois_d%27Arc_Bash_parade_30_%28racing_lawn_mowers%29.jpg

On campus housing, dining options, a well-equipped sports and health complex, and campus sponsored cultural and entertainment events mean students can choose to spend most of their time on campus if they wish. There are no busses, trains, taxis, and no ride share services like Uber or Lyft apart from a campus shuttle that operates in the Fall and Spring semesters meaning students without transportation typically stay within a few blocks of the university. However, most of the students are commuters, often driving an hour or more each way on Texas highways to attend class. A recent mapping project conducted at the University of Wisconsin – Madison identified nine counties that make up the "commuting zone" of my rural university – Hunt, Fannin, Delta, Hopkins, Rains, Van Zandt, Kaufman, Rockwall, and Collin counties. The commuting zone is based on a having a common labor force and a high degree of economic integration, resulting in a large geographic area that stretches from the far eastern edges of the DFW Metroplex, into areas near Tyler usually associated with East Texas. Northern areas of the commuting zone reach the Red River, the boundary between Texas and Oklahoma.[3] Interestingly, Collin County is also part of the commuting area but no longer the rural area it once was, doubling its population to more than one million people in the last twenty years, and becoming the sixth largest county in Texas.

It is also more racial and ethnically diverse than some of the other counties (12% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 17% Asian).[4]

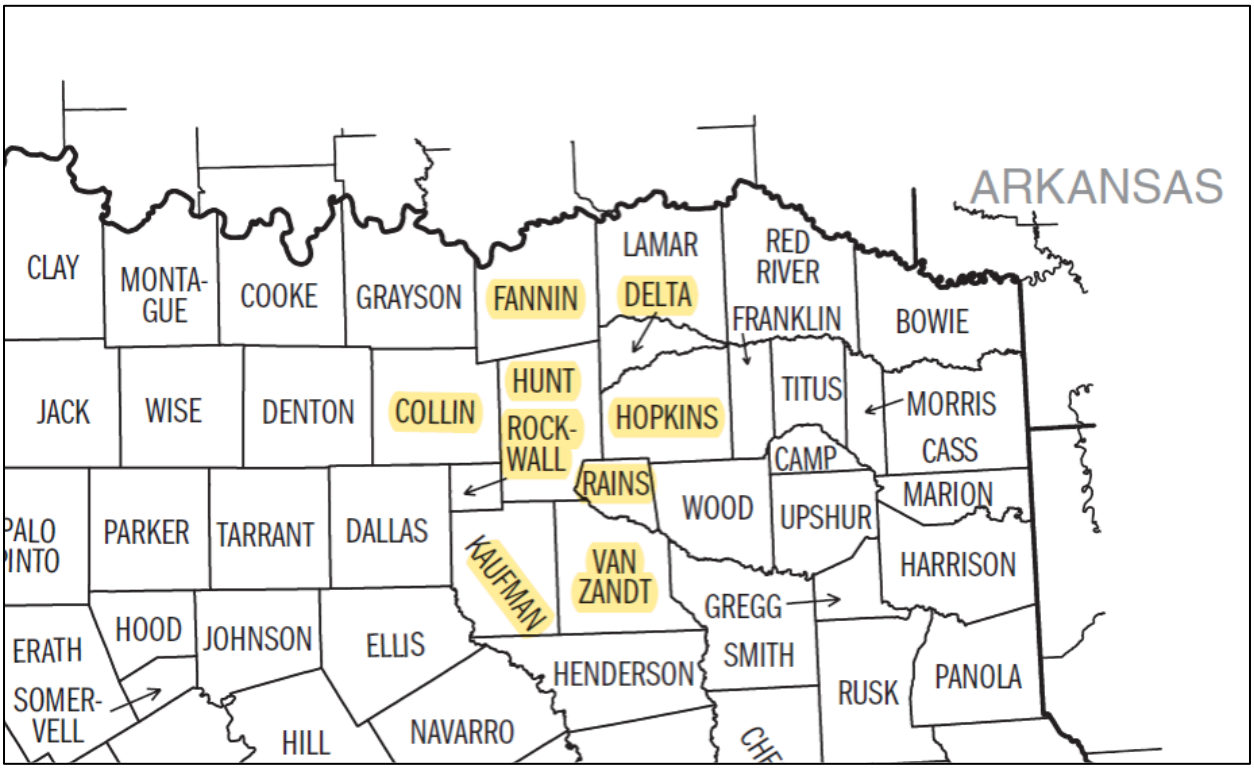

Image 3: Texas State and County Outline Map with color added to note commuting zone of Texas A&M University - Commerce. United States Census Bureau, Census 2000. Public Domain. https://demographics.texas.gov/Resources/Maps/County/TX2000.pdf

Most faculty members do not live in town, preferring the conveniences and amenities of Dallas and its thriving suburbs that, along with Fort Worth, blend into a vast metropolitan area of 7.6 million people. Life in Commerce moves at a slower pace than in the city, and it is usually quiet here, especially during the summer when most students pack up their dorm rooms and apartments to return home. Local matters concerning the city council, the parks board, or the public library renovation can easily dominate conversations, and the larger world outside with all of its complexities can seem very far away.

However, that complex world is not far away at all, as it is embodied by our ethnically and racially diverse students, their connections to family migrations, diasporas, colonization, industrialization, warfare, and plantation economies that brought them here, and their desires to enter a global workforce. The majority of our students come from local rural communities, small towns, the DFW Metroplex, other urban areas across Texas, and bordering states such as Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Many of our students are first-generation higher education students and about 70% receive some sort of financial aid, usually in the form of Pell grants,

scholarships, and loans. Our sports recruitment program is thriving, with football being the primary recruitment tool, perhaps not surprising in a state known for the Friday night lights of the high school stadium. Joining the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Southland Conference soon after the Lions won the Division II football national championship in 2017, has enabled us to attract students from further afield, especially California. Women's Soccer and Volleyball, Men's Basketball, and the Rodeo Team are all nationally ranked programs that draw students in from the Midwest, west coast, and Canada.

Additionally, the university has a significant number of non-traditional and older students either returning to university after a long absence, seeking an education for a career change, or using education benefits related to military service. Indeed, the traditional 18 to 21-year-old age group only comprises about 30% of our student body. Those in their mid to late 20s make up a little over 20%, and over 35% are 30 and older. Our student population is also gender diverse, with 62% of students identifying as women and 38% identifying as men. Over the last two decades, our ethnic and racial minority student populations have grown, as has our international student population, particularly from India, South Korea, and Nigeria but I have also had students from Columbia, Mexico, Canada, Germany, Serbia, the Netherlands, American Samoa, Philippines, Ghana, and Syria. In 2022, almost 19% of our students were Black, over 20% Hispanic, 2.7% Asian, and 5.7% international. Additionally, 6% of our student body is multiracial and white students make up 44% of our student population. All of these factors contribute to the university having above average diversity when compared to colleges of a similar size and status.[5]

Overall, our highly diverse student body creates an environment where students can interact and learn with peers from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. There are official functions organized to encourage connections between international students and faculty at the university such as a Holi Festival, an International Food Festival, a pop-up Asian market, and movie nights featuring the best of recent Korean, Nigerian, and Indian films. However, I have also witnessed numerous unforgettable moments in class. For instance, during a lecture on the end of the Cold War, a returning student shared her experience as a young girl visiting family with her mother in Berlin when the Wall came down. In a discussion of trade networks across Southwest Asia, a usually quiet veteran sitting in the back of class spoke up, "Hey, I've been there" and briefly described what he saw during his deployment as I used Google Earth to zoom into the approximate area of Baghdad's round core built by the Abbasids in the eighth century CE. I also remember the student who was inspired by her family connections to Hmong resettlement to conduct research and present on the tension and violence along the Texas Gulf Coast during the early 1980s when white fishers backed up by the Ku Klux Klan targeted resettled Vietnamese shrimpers. That student went on to earn her JD degree focusing on immigration law and is now a child protection

prosecutor and assistant county attorney in Minnesota. These are just a few examples of the numerous and often sobering connections our students have to the world outside this small rural university that highlight the power of diversity in fostering good educational outcomes.

Further enhancing this diverse learning environment, our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for 2014-2020, a requirement for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSOC) accreditation, focused on global competency to prepare students for an interconnected world and a globally competitive work force. This was a focus ideally suited for the world historian. During the period of Fall 2014 to Fall 2019, over 4,377 first-year students participated in the assessment of global competency, completing the pre-assessment during their first semester and the post-assessment at graduation. Internal readiness scores that measured such elements as self-awareness, risk taking, open-mindedness, and attentiveness to diversity approached 70% at pre-assessment. However, external readiness scores that measured global awareness, historical perspective, intercultural capability, and collaboration across cultures were lower at 48%.[6] To achieve a high aptitude score range of 82%-85%, courses with a global designation (GLB) proliferated across the curriculum in programs such as business, agriculture, health and human performance, political science, and history. These courses provided students with a more globally focused education, and may have attracted international students to our most successful programs. The QEP also included programs for students such as Global Scholar and Global Learner, which recognized their involvement in global courses and experiences. The Global Fellow program recognized and encouraged faculty engagement in global activities, such as course development, research travel, and professional development. Global Scholars and Global Fellows could also apply for significant funding opportunities for study abroad and other student-oriented travel.

First Graduation, Then the World?

Reading all of this, it might seem like a success story with large-scale university support, funding, and endorsement of globally focused learning in higher education. Although the focus has shifted more toward recruitment and retention in the last two years, globally focused classes and study abroad programs still exist giving students the opportunity to learn about the world and travel to countries such as Costa Rica, Poland, Argentina, and Australia. However, the Global Scholar, Learner, and Fellow programs have ended. Reviewing the results of exit surveys given to students upon graduation in Fall 2021 provides a clear indication of some real successes overall, but also highlights the need to continue our efforts and reevaluate the role of world history education. Careful reflection on student expectations upon graduation, their perception of the skills acquired in higher education, and job readiness in terms of global competence indicates

there is more work to do. While these figures are specifically from my university, they may also be reflective of patterns at similar institutions.

Exit surveys showed that students' most important reason for pursuing a degree was career development including promotions and new opportunities (53%), with "personal growth" a distant second (19%).[7] After graduation, most students anticipated beginning a new job that required a degree in their chosen field of study (22%), while others planned to begin actively searching for a job in their degreed field (20%) or interview for jobs in general (18%). About 20% planned to attend graduate school, and a smaller number were continuing in their current job (15%).[8] Among students who worked at the time of graduation, the highest percentage were employed in management, business, and finance (28%), with education and library jobs coming in second (19%), and service and recreational jobs rounding out the top three (14%).[9]

The exit survey also posed a series of questions to students related to globalization and cultural diversity. Most students either agreed (55%) or strongly agreed (47%) that faculty within their major introduced them to a broad range of ideas, perspectives, and worldviews.[10] Interestingly (and perhaps disappointingly), when asked to rank the five most marketable skills in their field of study, globalization and cultural diversity ranked toward the bottom, well behind critical thinking/problem solving, leadership, personal responsibility, ethical and social responsibility, and discipline-specific knowledge. In fact, integration of broad knowledge, digital technology, and both empirical and quantitative skills, also ranked higher than globalization and cultural diversity. This is an interesting result considering how measurement of globalization and cultural diversity could share a reciprocal dynamic with critical thinking/problem solving in students' lives. Additionally, ranking globalization and cultural diversity lower than other marketable skills is likely dependent on the student's field of study whether that is business, education, agriculture, sciences, or the humanities. Despite its lower rank, most students responded that they had a good (38%), very good (30%), or excellent (24%) current level of skill in globalization and cultural diversity, for a combined total of 92%.[11] While the post-assessment of global competency in the Five Year Interim Referral Report submitted to SACSOC in 2020 indicated that graduating undergraduate students scored 74% (a 4% increase) in internal readiness and 67% (a 10% increase) in external readiness, both were still in the "developing" range – not yet achieving the desired 82%-85% of "high aptitude." Nonetheless, these figures do show some improvement throughout students' university experience, with the report perceptively noting, "global competence is a life-long goal and not one easily accomplished."[12] The 2021 exit survey asked students to rate their agreement with four statements that are of deep interest to world historians.

Upon completion of my degree:

- "I am prepared for an interconnected world."

- "I have knowledge of the interconnectedness of global dynamics (issues, processes, trends, and systems)."
- "I have the ability/skill to apply knowledge of the interconnectedness of global dynamics (issues, processes, trends, and systems)."
- "I view myself as an engaged citizen within an interconnected and diverse world."

These exit survey questions may not pertain precisely toward *world history education* but they do assess student perceptions of their global competency education, and are further reflected in the student learning outcomes our faculty assesses for each history course with the GLB designation. The exit survey showed that students overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, with 93% agreeing to the first two statements, 92% agreeing with the third statement, and 94% agreeing with the last statement.[13] As world historians, how should we interpret this data? It is possible that students are overly confident in their global competency skills especially if we consider the lower percentages of students (only 55% agreed and 47% strongly agreed) who thought faculty within their major introduced them to a broad range of ideas, perspectives, and worldviews. However, classroom interactions with faculty are not the only avenues of gaining a more globalized education. Other possibilities include international events on campus and interaction with peers discussed above. Students may come from diverse cities or neighborhoods, especially those who commute from the Dallas area or moved here from other urban areas, developing those competencies outside the university setting.

Students are also engaged in patterns of consumption in their daily lives that link small town university life to the much wider world through cultural diffusion, immigration, workforce mobility, international supply chains, and a globalized entertainment industry that may give them a sense of competency. For instance, they may eat the *chana masala* served at the campus dining hall, made with chickpeas grown in Washington that are then cooked into a delicious Indian curry by one of our highly skilled food service workers from South Asia or Latin America. Maybe later in the afternoon they pick up a bottle of water produced in Fiji to stay hydrated in their first-year experience signature course, Star Lore: The Mystery, Magic, and Mythology. Their favorite Nike hoodie may have a label indicating its origin is Vietnam while the Apple airpods they use to listen to the latest hit "S-Class" from the K-pop band Stray Kids come from China. This interconnectedness may not always be readily apparent to students but by asking them to respond to these four questions, they may be realizing they are, indeed, living in a world full of diversity and global dynamics. Ideally, as world historians, we can provide them with the skills and opportunities to further enhance their understanding of how these global dynamics changed over time, creating the world we all live in today. The biggest challenge in pursuing that goal is that only a small number of university students are required to take a world history.

World History and the Major

I am a world historian by training, but most of my teaching contact with the wider student population is through the United States history survey courses I, along with all other faculty members in our small department, teach. In Texas, United States history is divided into two chronological sections split by the Civil War era, and is part of the higher education core curriculum, but world history is not. Some institutions of higher education in Texas offer one or more first-year world history survey courses, or it may be one of several options available to fulfill part of the humanities core. For example, Dallas College, a regional community college system with seven campuses and almost 70,000 students, offers a world civilizations course in two sections as an option to fulfill the social and behavioral sciences core for their Associate's degree program.[14] Local school districts are increasingly offering dual credit and Advanced Placement courses in world history, taught either by their own teachers who hold at least eighteen graduate hours of history or by instructors employed by regional universities. This hodge-podge of courses is perhaps one of the biggest hurdles in assessing world history curriculum in Texas higher education. As world historians, we may see the value and impact of a solid foundation in world history, but because it is not part of the state's history core and therefore varies in terms of level, readings, content, and instruction it is difficult to assess with an agreed upon set of metrics. However, I do not mean to suggest world history standards in higher education will solve all our problems. As David Fisher reminds us within the context of K-12, state standards for world history "are often a problematic compromise that should be approached by curriculum developers, teachers, and *those of us who train teachers* with the skepticism and analytical skills that practicing history imparts to us."[15]

By 2009, world history was part of the K-12 standards in every state but there were "few world history sources" within higher education for training teachers despite the demand in high schools.[16] Over the past fifteen years, things have gotten better. Every year, teacher workshops occur across the country, either in person or increasingly over Zoom since the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching panels are scattered across the annual World History Association Conference programs in recent years, with the 2023 meeting in Pittsburgh featuring a variety of teaching workshops, roundtables, and panels in every session. Journals like *World History Connected* and *World History Bulletin* prominently feature teaching articles, lesson plans, and sample syllabi that offer ways for teachers to structure their classes and better understand temporal and spatial interconnectedness.

In the case of my university, we offer no world history courses at the first-year level. However, we do offer A World Divided: Global History as a sophomore level (200) course that satisfies the humanities elective for non-history majors. It is a course with the topic chosen by the instructor; recent offerings have included Conflict & Revolution

in Mexico, The End of the Roman Republic, Crime and Punishment, and World History through Graphic Novels. We also offer an upper-level (300) Historical Geography course primarily intended for students pursuing teaching certification. The history faculty also teaches various upper-level (400) world history courses on diverse topics such as Themes in World History (special topics based on faculty expertise), Mapping Our World: An Introduction to Cartography, Food in World History, and Global Environmental History. These courses are all valuable for history majors and minors seeking to fulfill their program requirements, and for individuals interested in broadening their knowledge of the world in which they live. However, I would like to focus on two specific courses: World History to the 17th Century and The Modern World. These are 300 level world history courses currently taught by two faculty members in the department and required for all of our 75 history majors and minors, and those seeking teaching certification in History or Social Studies.[17] While students in other degree programs may take these courses with permission from the instructor, this is a rare occurrence in my fourteen years at this institution. As a result, most of our university students outside the history program may only get a small amount of world history instruction in other classes, depending on the instructor and course topic, or none at all.

The first section of the course, World History to the 17th Century, covers ancient history through the early modern period, with a focus on early human social organization, the development and decline of classical cultures, interactions between classical and nomadic peoples, and the evolution of world religions. The course also explores societies after the collapse of classical empires, world religions in the cultures of the early modern period, and communication and transportation revolutions that usher in modernity. The second section of the course, The Modern World, begins in 1500 and covers topics such as the ecological conditions of globalization, modern imperialism and colonialism, themes related to modernity, non-western philosophies of resistance, and technological and intellectual developments. The course also examines the intersections of world trade, religion, and economy with a special emphasis on the non-Western world.

Both of these courses cover an ambitious amount of ground in a single semester. To manage the content, my colleagues and I use various approaches including manipulating periodization, using the lens of contact and connections between peoples, and organizing the courses around themes rather than regional boundaries. Certain themes, such as the Atlantic Slave Trade, dovetail nicely with other courses offered in the department like African-American History and Transatlantic History. We may use textbooks, collections of primary sources, focused sources to highlight certain themes, and readings on professionalization to supplement the historical content.[18] Depending on the course, students may be required to complete a research project, group projects, presentations, quizzes, imaginative papers, lesson plans, or book reviews in addition to

regular exams. While some of the historical content is introductory in nature, the interpretive analysis required in the assignments is appropriate for an upper level course. However, it is balancing act when students who are training to be teachers may begin the semester noting their last world history class was in the tenth grade. They may have taken it four years prior if they are traditional students, ten years prior if they are a veteran returning to the classroom, and perhaps twenty-four years prior if they are re-training for a new career in teaching. In those cases, we must carefully work together reviewing and learning new material so they can complete the course with a solid foundation of content knowledge to carry them through the rest of their program.

Most students typically enroll in these world history courses during their sophomore or junior year, often after transferring from a junior or community college, and most have completed their core curriculum. The department envisions that students take these courses first, before enrolling in more specialized upper-level courses, to gain the broad training in content and analytical skills that will help them excel. These courses, along with the two sections of United States history and other courses required in the major should provide students with the information they need to take the content exam in history or social studies for teacher certification.

The Texas Examination of Educator Standards (TExES) Social Studies Exam for grades 7-12 certification contains 140 multiple choice questions covering seven subject areas including World History, United States History, and Texas History; Geography, Culture, and the Behavioral and Social Sciences; Government and Citizenship; Economics and Science, Technology and Society; and Social Studies Foundations, Skills, Research and Instruction. World History makes up about 15% of the total exam with United States History (20%) and Texas History (13%) contributing to 48% of the entire certification exam.[19] The TExES History Exam for grades 7-12 certification is weighted significantly more toward World History with 30% of the questions in that domain. United States History (36%), Texas History (20%), and Foundations, Skills, Research, and Instruction (14%) make up the rest of the exam.[20] Of course, student schedules do not always align perfectly and some students may not take the world history courses until their final year. However, informal feedback indicates that our students do well on the teacher certification content exams; upon graduation, most feel well prepared to enter classrooms of their own or apply to graduate programs, whether at our university or elsewhere.

The Gravitas of World History

I approach the question, 'Why Do We Teach World History?,' perhaps from a different perspective since I teach world history to a small group of history majors, between 35 and 70 students per year. My responses are related to my students' personal and professional growth, meeting the growing needs of rural communities, and paving a path of change for the future.

At the start of each semester, I ask my students informal questions about their experiences in history courses, particularly world history courses, how much traveling they have done, and if they have any particular interests in historical topics, cultures, or places they might like to learn about in the class. As majors they all love history but note most of their high school history teachers were coaches, well-meaning but largely untrained in world history. Most of their high school world history teachers used a "Western civ plus" model based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), as discussed by David Fisher in a recent *World History Connected* forum and book chapter.[21] Knowing this, we spend time in class working to fill gaps and cover familiar ground with new frameworks of analysis that do not rely on eurocentrism and nationalist discourse, issues cogently explored in Stephen Jackson's recent book that examines world history textbooks and curricula used over the last century in Texas high schools.[22] Teaching world history in K-12 schools may be part of an ongoing discussion about standards, decisions made by the State Board of Education (SBOE), and the currently fraught climate of 'divisive concepts' legislation that works to curb discussion of topics such as racism, sexism, and discrimination that can spill over from American history classrooms.[23] However, world history in higher education presents an opportunity to offer students a more complicated and interconnected historical perspective they may not receive elsewhere.

Questions about travel reveal most of our history majors have limited experience with national and international travel due to work, family, or economic concerns but many have an abiding interest in exploring other parts of the world. I encourage my students to consider study abroad programs and help them with letters of recommendation, recognizing that funding through scholarships or fellowships is often necessary to cover the costs of a trip that might be over $2,000 but the educational rewards of which are incalculable.[24] By the time they graduate, several are able to take advantage of study abroad opportunities, through the International Programs office or the Political Science department, with partial funding through scholarships. My colleagues and I in the History department are also developing a study abroad course specifically designed with a world history focus on cuisine and Afro-Eurasian cultural exchanges through trade around the Mediterranean to give our students even more opportunities to develop intercultural competencies.

For the majority of our majors the world history classroom is the most accessible setting to explore their own world in new ways, and they are excited to learn about unfamiliar places and societies. For instance, learning about the development and legacies of colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific during the nineteenth century may help students in rural southern communities make sense of similar issues of wealth disparity related to enslavement, plantation economies, land dispossession, and racial segregation closer to home. In some ways, they may have an advantage when learning about certain topics such as crop domestication and agriculture, push and pull factors

for migration from agrarian areas to more urban areas, or long distance trade networks stretching over vast areas of sparely populated land. Perhaps more so than urban students, they can relate it to their own experiences living in a rural hinterland that lies just outside of the shadow of the fourth largest metropolitan areas in the country.

To capitalize on their experience, I always try to incorporate local history in my "world history happens everywhere, even in Commerce" approach. For example, I point out the old railroad bridge crossing the highway on the north side of town has a faded "COTTON BELT" painted on it, signifying Commerce was once a stop on a rail network that stretched from northeast Texas, which in 1900 produced 3.5 million bales of cotton on 7.1 million acres (statewide), to St. Louis, Missouri.[25] Students who live in small nearby towns of Cooper, Pecan Gap, Wolfe City, Leonard, Bonham or the city of Paris further to the north drive under that bridge every day and I can use this often overlooked landmark to link Commerce to the larger global history of commodities like cotton, enslavement, and industrialization in the nineteenth century.[26]

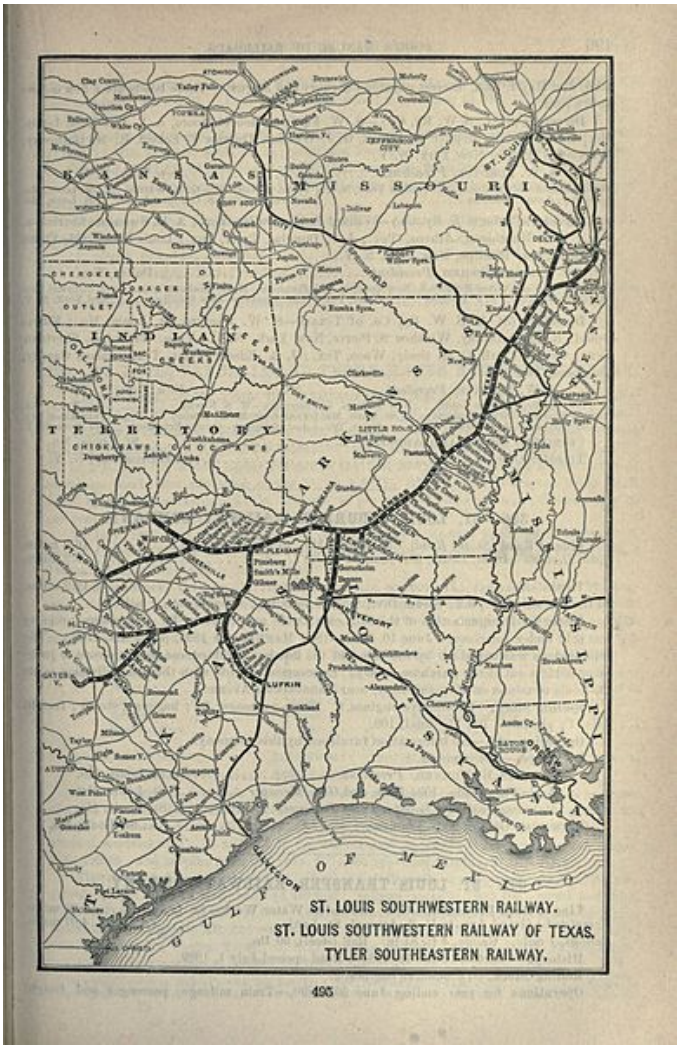

Image 4: St. Louis Southwestern Railway from *Poor's Manual of the Railroads of the United States,* 1891. In the Public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1891_Poor%27s_St._Louis_Southwestern_Railway.jpg

A few miles south of town, a much newer sign erected in 2014 marks the stretch of road between Interstate 30 and Highway 11 as Flying Tiger Memorial Highway.[27] I use this commemoration of Commerce as the birthplace of Lieutenant General Claire Lee Chennault, most known for leading the American Volunteer Group (AVG) known as the "Flying Tigers" and the Chinese Air Force during World War II, to talk about the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chiang Kai-Shek, the Chinese Civil War, and the China-Burma-India Theater in World War II. Using this approach of linking the local to the global using landmarks such as the old bridge of the Cotton Belt Route of the St. Louis Southwestern Railway or the Flying Tigers Memorial Highway uses familiar places to illustrate connections and encourages students to keep searching for links between the global and the local in their own communities.

Image 5: Claire L. Chennault with Soong May-ling (Madame Chiang Kai-shek) and Chiang Kai-shek, 1940s. In the Public Domain of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, and the United States at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1940s_Chiang_Soong_Chennault.gif

Teaching world history in a rural-serving institution such as Texas A&M University - Commerce provides students with the tools to understand their lives and their communities in a global context, regardless of how small their community may be. It brings greater awareness of the complex institutional and systemic problems that affect the lives of more than 50 million people living in rural communities in the United States. In Texas, with a total population of more than 29 million (41% white, 40% Hispanic, 12% Black, 7% other), about 4.2 million people live in rural communities according to the 2020 Census, giving the state the largest rural population in the United

States. Perhaps ironically, Texas also has the second largest urban population behind California, with 24.4 million, making it almost 84% urban as well.[28] Rural communities face economic instability, poverty, joblessness, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare and mental health resources, and inadequate addiction support services. Rural educational systems often struggle with brain drain, as people migrate into urban and suburban areas, making it difficult for schools to provide students with diverse perspectives and global knowledge. Despite these challenges, rural communities also pride themselves on their resiliency, grit, determination, making do with less, and sense of community, particularly when times get tough.

Yet not all rural communities are the same; each differs based on region, population, and pressing local issues such as water quality, failing infrastructure, or land use. There is also an assumption that rural communities are predominately white but that is often not the case with rural Black, Latinx, and Native American populations being common in Texas and other southern and bordering states. In fact, about 20% (10 million people) of the United States' rural population are people of color.[29] Additionally, rural communities also have an increasingly visible LGBTQI+ population and a growing number of immigrants.[30] However, policymakers rarely discuss this diversity in rural communities, which can lead to underrepresentation in debates about education legislation and funding. This underrepresentation or invisibility can make it difficult to see the needs and successes of rural communities.

According to Rural Educators Alliance at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, nine million students attend K-12 schools in rural areas across the United States.[31] Those rural schools face perpetual challenges such as insufficient funding, inadequate technological infrastructure, and difficulty recruiting well-trained, certified teachers who are willing to work in rural areas.[32] Additionally, institutional and structural discrimination works to perpetuate poverty in rural communities of color, resulting in lower socio-economic levels. Such structural challenges seriously impede efforts to provide optimal education and retain highly qualified educators. Rural students who want to become educators in their own communities and contribute to the educational systems in which they grew up face these chronically underfunded systems. This lack of funding directly affects students' opportunities to access higher education, attend the college of their choice, and meet requirements for certification. As Cory Collins notes in "Rural Schools and Hard History," rural students "witness firsthand the difficulty of teaching in underfunded schools – and the better resources and pay elsewhere."[33] This makes it crucial to provide an effective education that prepares students to become teachers, and inspires them to want to remain part of the rural education system.

World historians at rural-serving institutions may not be able to solve funding issues and enhance high-speed internet in rural areas, but we can tackle teacher preparation in world history. This is critically important as teachers with a solid

foundation of world history training can develop the necessary skills to assess new ideas, embrace and celebrate diversity, challenge xenophobia, and promote equity. They can also help their students understand the cultural and religious diversity within their own rural communities, and consider new and innovative ideas to revitalize these evolving communities. Students who leave rural areas for cities will also have a better appreciation for the diversity of their new communities. Rural-serving institutions like my university provide the training necessary to help teachers move away from the "Western civ plus" model or "the West and the rest" version of world history. This approach can transform history education within the communities we serve, as "numerous studies show that most teachers return to work in the areas where they grew up," enhancing the comprehensive quality of world history taught in these same high schools.[34] Certainly, world history educators in both urban and rural areas have been working for years to teach a more inclusive and accurate history at all levels of instruction but there is still work to do as students become teachers and scholars, themselves.[35]

This strengthening of world history education continues under the broad 60x30TX strategic plan launched by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 2015, and expanded from the 25-34 age group to the entire workforce in 2022. The ambitious plan is "focused on student success and establishing a globally competitive Texas workforce by 2030," with the target of 60% of all Texans between the ages of 25 and 64 attaining a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential by 2030.[36] The mid-point review noted that 40% of Texans had a certificate or degree in 2015, and by 2020 that percentage was still only 45.3%. Most of the degree holders are concentrated in the major cities and surrounding areas, with rural areas having the lowest number of degree holders, between 33%-39% of their regional populations.[37] For example, 31.8% of Commerce residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher likely due to the presence of the university while only 21.3% of Hunt County (population of 108,282) residents as a whole have bachelor's degrees or higher. Comparatively, the city of Plano (population of 289,547) in Collin County (population of 1.1 million) has 58.1% and 53.4% of residents, respectively, who hold bachelor's degrees or higher.[38] Achieving the 60% goal by 2030 is unlikely unless a significant number of educated people relocate to Texas. Attaining a certificate or degree also means that students graduating from Texas high schools must have "the skills to thrive in a postsecondary environment," with an additional goal of "all graduates (target 80%)" having "identified marketable skills."[39] Although Texas is closer to meeting this goal with 79% of graduates having marketable skills in 2020, that number is now stagnant.

At the same time, the nationwide teacher shortage has reached a crisis point in Texas. Formed by Governor Greg Abbott in 2021 to examine teacher retention and recruitment, the Teacher Vacancy Task Force released its final report in February 2023. In it, the Task Force recommends significant salary increases, better benefits, and more

incentives for hard-to-fill positions. The report also proposes expanding Grow Your Own pathways, encouraging high school students and staff to become teachers in their communities, enhancing training and support, and providing access to high-quality instruction materials. Finally, the Task Force recommends better policies on staffing and scheduling that respect teacher time for planning and development along with increased support for school discipline.[40]

The successful implementation of the revised 60x30TX strategic plan and the recommendations of the Teacher Vacancy Task Force could prove to be advantageous to teachers and those involved in training teachers in world history. This could potentially increase the number of students pursuing teaching certificates in history or social studies through pipeline programs that offer mentorship and educational resources for underrepresented populations, financial support, and a significant increase in salaries.[41] While this would be beneficial for all teachers in Texas, as the state currently ranks 28th in the nation for teacher salaries, it would especially benefit those in rural areas whose median beginning salaries lag $8,998 behind the median beginning salary in suburban areas.[42] We will be able to help more world history teachers become highly qualified, and their students, in turn, will be better equipped to be global citizens of the twenty-first century.

My students who are training for teaching careers are, however, understandably concerned about their futures as teachers. Despite promises for the future, teacher salaries are low and the work hours are long. Many of my students have families and children to support and necessarily look toward jobs in suburban areas where the pay is much better than their rural hometowns. They also dread the idea of entering a politicized teaching environment that seems paradoxically hostile to education and educators.[43] They have spent several years' worth of time and money receiving the training and expertise to do their jobs well, are eager to teach history and social studies, and want to excel. Added to their anxieties about entering the classroom as a first year teacher, overwhelmed by the toughest year they will likely have as educators, students worry about inadvertently saying something on a long and ever-changing list of forbidden terms, and then being fired in their first month on the job.

Those who will be teaching United States history are admittedly more concerned about getting caught up in the current history wars than those who have accepted jobs teaching world history or world geography.[44] However, my world history students routinely ask me if they should be worried. Some consider continuing on to graduate school, waiting to see how things shake out over the next few years and providing them with the option to teach AP or dual credit courses. I am not sure what to tell them about their concerns. World historians and their students, at all levels, are essential for understanding the history of humanity with all of its failures and successes, its continuities and differences. I do know that our students are entering a profession

critical to shaping the future of our society and they need our support and guidance more than ever.

I often wonder if I should quote some sage words to my students; something beyond my own platitudes of encouragement and practical advice. Perhaps Nelson Mandela's profound conviction that, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."[45] Or, Virginia Woolf's belief in the power of the unfettered mind: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind."[46] My students have already heard me say, "If you want to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh or they'll kill you," attributed to either Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, or others.[47] Perhaps, as in many cases, I return to the words of Bill and Ted, "Be excellent to each other."[48]

This forum asks, 'Why do we teach world history,' a simple question with a web of answers. Pragmatically, I teach world history to help my students fulfill their goals of becoming historians and teachers by giving them the content and analytical tools necessary to pass their certification content exams and earn their baccalaureate degrees, so they may enter the workforce or move on to graduate school. Hopefully, this will provide them an opportunity to earn better salaries and reshape the primary and secondary education systems, to move away from Eurocentric historical models, and offer future generations a more inclusive and relevant history for all. This process could be helped along considerably if Texas included world history in its higher education core curriculum, requiring at least one course, but ideally two, in addition to United States history so that all students have exposure to world history beyond the tenth grade classroom.

That is not, however, what I think about when looking for a sense of inspiration before a class on ancient Pacific migrations or understanding the brutality of warfare in the twentieth century. Present in those moments are the fundamental reasons why I *really* teach world history. Together, my students and I discover the world we all inhabit and our place in it, the beautiful and terrible things humanity has done throughout our history, so that we have a more authentic sense of our collective identity – to know who we really are, historically. Going beyond the more individual Aristotelian sense of self, only in knowing ourselves and others, can we understand what it has meant to be human and how this understanding has changed over time. That sense of humanity and perhaps a common purpose may ultimately be the key to our survival in a future of increasingly contentious political maneuvering, economic disparities, population pressures, cyclical scarcity, and climate change on a planetary scale. World history is a reminder that we are all in this together.

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