

AHA Statement Regarding Historians and the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis

Approved by AHA Council April 3, 2020

The American Historical Association recognizes the many difficulties we all—individuals, families, communities, and institutions—confront in the current COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, institutions face particular challenges, given responsibilities not only to their mission (if not survival) but also to their employees and constituencies. We urge all institutions that employ historians to acknowledge the stressful conditions under which we are all laboring and to offer as much flexibility as possible in considering the needs of their employees and colleagues in these trying circumstances.

The AHA has joined 40 other academic associations in a [statement](#) authored by the American Sociological Association regarding recommendations for temporary adjustments in faculty review and reappointment procedures in response to the sudden transformation of the teaching and research landscape. We support calls for limiting the use of student evaluations in the review process of faculty and for adjusting expectations for scholarly productivity during a time when access to libraries, archives, and other scholarly resources is difficult if not impossible. Additionally, we join in the call for university administrators to be clear as to whether criteria for review, reappointment, and tenure will be modified and precisely how. We believe, however, that it is in the best interests of all concerned that any pause in reappointment, tenure, and promotion clocks be optional, according to the preference of the candidate. Not all faculty stand to benefit from a delay in their reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions if mandated for all by administrations.

Similarly, not all higher education faculty are on the tenure track. The precise arrangements by which scholars are employed vary considerably, including the precarity of their appointments. The difficult financial position of many institutions themselves—many colleges and universities reasonably fear they are on the edge of collapse—renders this situation even more complicated as budget-cutting starts with expenses least encumbered by restrictions or commitments. Cognizant of these financial challenges, the AHA nevertheless urges all higher education institutions that employ contract and/or part-time faculty to compensate them fully for courses already contracted for spring, summer, and fall offerings.

Historians are not only teachers; we are research scholars as well. Historical research has been seriously disrupted for historians in all categories of employment, as well as for our students. Many higher education faculty and graduate students have not been able to use research grants or other available funds, take up residential or other fellowships, or travel as needed. We urge departments and universities to be flexible and understanding in accommodating the needs of students whose studies have been interrupted through no fault of their own. Universities should consider extending the duration of funded support to graduate students as well as offering whatever support possible to graduate students who have suffered serious financial losses

relating to the impact of the pandemic. Such disruptions might include incurring added expenses for interrupted travel; loss of rent, visa, and other fees; and similar situations that cannot always be specified in advance but which are quite real.

The AHA is also attentive to the impact of COVID-19 on other institutions that employ or serve the needs of historians. Libraries, museums, and archives should similarly be as flexible as possible, adapting working schedules for staff and re-scheduling programming, events, and travel for both staff and research fellows. The National Archives and Records Administration, for example, has adjusted its normal operations to balance the need of completing its mission-critical work while also adhering to physical distancing recommendations for the safety of staff essential to operations. The AHA calls upon NARA to augment communications to the historical community regarding the effect of the virus on FOIA and other processing functions.

The work that historians do in all of these venues is especially important in troubled times when facts, evidence, and context are imperative to generating effective and humane public policy. Historians weave evidence and context into narrative; a society in crisis needs to have faith that the narratives that illustrate and define that crisis can stand the light of the scrutiny. Historians can also play an important role by providing context, in this case shedding light on the history of pandemics and the utility of that history to policy formation and public culture. Everything has a history and historians are especially well suited to explain social and cultural challenges met in crisis situations, epidemics and pandemics among them. The fears, challenges, and permanent changes that will accompany this pandemic are both rooted in a historical context and have historical precedents themselves.

Like our colleagues in related disciplines, historians can also explore the challenges public health authorities, governments, and nonprofit institutions face in mediating possible conflicts between individual rights and the good of the greater society. When a neighbor asks, “is it worth sacrificing the economy for a few hundred thousand lives,” it’s time for a humanist to enter the discussion. This important, and difficult, conversation too has a history.