

March 16, 2022

Dr. Wendy Wintersteen, President

Dr. Jonathan Wickert, Senior Vice President and Provost

Dr. Beate Schmittmann, Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Dr. William Graves, Dean, Graduate College

Iowa State University

Ames, IA 50011

Dear Dr. Wintersteen, Dr. Wickert, Dr. Schmittmann, and Dr. Graves,

The American Historical Association expresses grave concern about Iowa State University's "reimagining" of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the imposition of a cumulative 34% cut to the Department of History's already lean operating budget. The department teaches over 200 undergraduate majors and offers general education instruction to all of Iowa State's nearly 24,000 undergraduate students. It also oversees a leading history and social studies secondary licensure program, training the teachers who will in turn teach history to students across Iowa. All of these important functions will suffer from this drastic cut.

"Reimagining LAS" imposes differential cuts across the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, assigning to the history department a disproportionately severe allocation. The AHA's leadership understands budgets, large public universities, and the challenges of difficult decisions. But we are mystified by the logic of a budget that will so dramatically diminish the presence of a department that has performed well, operated efficiently, and plays a central role in the university's historic roots as a land grant institution dedicated to the role of higher education in public culture.

This is not simply a matter of a discipline concerned about its footprint. The very logic of this plan's approach is insensitive to the quality of undergraduate education. The plan would reduce tenure-eligible historians from 21 to 8–10 faculty members through attrition, generating a reliance on adjunct labor to fill essential teaching needs. There is ample evidence that relying on contingent, part-time labor is not in anyone's best interests, including the university and its students. This approach to undergraduate education deprives students of long-term contact with faculty and removes incentives for teachers to invest in the institution and its students. The AHA is well aware that employment of underpaid professionals working on short-term contracts is not an unusual strategy in certain corners of higher education. But balancing the budget by shortchanging undergraduates and curtailing robust communities of practice among undergraduate instructors is anything but "reimagination."

This proposal to invest in "programs and initiatives that address student and employer demands" cannot be reconciled with a 34% reduction in the Department of History's budget. Drastically reducing faculty in a core liberal arts discipline like history is an especially counterproductive move at a time when civic leaders from all corners of the political landscape have lamented the level of historical knowledge of American citizens. Overwhelming evidence shows that employers seek the kind of skills a history degree

can provide. Even Google, a leader in the STEM-heavy tech industry, has found that the skills most important to the success of their employees were not related to STEM expertise. They were the kinds of skills learned in history courses: to communicate well, to understand others' perspectives, and to assemble disparate ideas into coherent strategy. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that degrees in history (including the PhD) gain in value over time, given the likelihood of these skills providing the foundation for leadership positions. To decimate a history department is a lose-lose proposition: it deprives students of essential learning and skills, even as it strips a university of the essential perspectives and intellectual resources so necessary to confront the present and shape the future.

There can be little doubt that this budget will make it impossible for the history department to maintain a viable graduate program. ISU's doctoral program in Rural, Agricultural, Technological, and Environmental [RATE] History is a nationally distinctive program that has long produced important scholarship in these vital areas of study. It is a cornerstone of historical research and writing on the state of Iowa and across the Midwest, with an important impact in local communities and on the national stage. The people of Iowa look to ISU's History Department and its graduate program for leadership in teaching and research in the state and region.

Three years ago, the AHA, in conjunction with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, awarded the ISU Department of History a Career Diversity Implementation Grant to join a cohort of 20 research universities, including Michigan, Illinois, Texas A&M, Michigan State, Texas, and Brown, to reconsider their assumptions about graduate education, and to develop an innovative plan to enhance their department. Our efforts began with the question, "What is the purpose of your program?" The collaborative work on the part of a hardworking faculty produced both process and results that we have cited as a model in visits to other campuses.

This faculty-driven reimagining engaged faculty, students, and alumni—newly cultivated at both the undergraduate and graduate level for this purpose—through panels, discussions, emails, curriculum development, [website development](#), course design, and outreach to extension and potential internship sites. The Department of History's recent external report praises RATE reforms, with one reviewer commenting to a faculty member that their efforts were a "model for how a program should evolve in the 21st century."

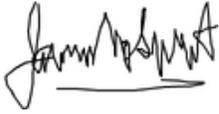
Now, on the cusp of finally implementing those reforms in fall 2022—and just weeks after the LAS Curriculum Committee approved the RATE program's new introductory graduate course—it appears that this effort might have been for nothing.

Faculty members in the Department of History are active scholars, engaged public citizens, and experts in their areas of research. They are winners of awards and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the Fulbright Commission, and many more. They have served in leadership roles in the Agricultural History Society, American Historical Association, Medieval Academy of America, Society for Historians of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era, Society for the History of Technology, Society for Military History, and others. That

learning, expertise, and commitment to public service extends to the classroom and across the university to benefit students, alumni, their academic peers, and Iowans at large.

We urge the college to reconsider its drastic differential cuts. As Dean Schmittmann acknowledged in a recent ISU Faculty Senate meeting, the Department of History operates in the black. It is not a drain, but a positive good to the budget, the university, and the citizens of Iowa.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James H. Sweet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent horizontal stroke at the end.

James H. Sweet
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Grossman". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James R. Grossman
Executive Director