

AHA Statement on Department Closures and Faculty Firings

Approved by AHA Council, July 2020

All students benefit from studying history at the undergraduate level. The American Historical Association has, and will continue to, assist history departments in making the case for the imperative of historical learning and thinking in higher education.

The Association recognizes that the compounding crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic implications have resulted in a dramatic decline in higher education revenues. Given the uncertainties—financial, epidemiological, and otherwise—of the upcoming fall term, administrators confront difficult choices. As historians, we recognize that an unprecedented combination of circumstances complicates decision-making even further.

Wise decision-making by leaders in higher education, however, must be informed by historical perspective. Historians know how to take the long view. Their work, by its very nature, draws from, integrates, and synthesizes a variety of disciplines. Colleges and universities need these faculty members as participants in governance. The negative consequences of closing a history department would not take long to observe but would take years to reverse.

A glance at recent references in the media reveals that our discipline is an attractive target for the budgetary axe. Because history education prepares students for careers rather than jobs, its benefits are readily underestimated. This is especially ironic given that the historical knowledge and thinking that undergird the work of citizenship are arguably more essential now than ever. For this reason alone, history education must retain its vibrancy and institutional integrity.

The AHA recognizes that every discipline has a claim to its centrality to higher education; moreover, each institution has its own mission, its own priorities, and its own culture. What we ask, however, is that individuals making budgetary decisions in higher education respect the established principles and procedures of faculty governance and consult with faculty from all disciplines at their institution. We expect that leaders will prioritize the educational missions of their institutions in a manner consistent with the humane values that stand at the core of education itself.

The AHA stands prepared to help history departments state their case. The content and methodology of history are crucial to the education of intellectually agile graduates who are well-prepared to navigate dynamic work environments and participate fully in civic life. History students not only gain knowledge and develop insights and judgement that help them succeed in college and contribute to their communities; they also learn skills—in communication, analysis, cultural competence, and research, among others—that are consistently cited by employers as important credentials. To succeed in college, and subsequently to be effective participants in workplaces and communities, students must learn to evaluate one or more potentially competing accounts and interpretations of things that (ostensibly) happened in the recent or distant past—whether those are accounts of an election, a riot, a religious awakening, changes in workplaces, or an intellectual breakthrough. Citizens of a democratic republic

need to be able to evaluate sources and evidence in a glut of digital information, and to think clearly in the midst of a cacophony of voices in the public sphere.

Several higher education institutions have recently closed or consolidated history departments, or laid off substantial numbers of historians. Others now contemplate such measures. Doing so comes at immense cost to students and to colleges and universities themselves, and to society as a whole. To eliminate or decimate a history department is a lose-lose proposition: it deprives students of essential learning and skills, even as it strips institutions of the essential perspectives and intellectual resources so necessary to confront the present and shape the future.