

May 14, 2019

Professor Janet Levit
Provost, University of Tulsa
via email: janet-levit@utulsa.edu

Dear Provost Levit:

The American Historical Association expresses deep concern about the dramatic restructuring plan released by the University of Tulsa on April 11. Apparently prepared largely behind closed doors (or at least with limited access) and without meaningful input from members of the university's history department, the new Tulsa *True Commitment* plan envisions radical cutbacks in history and other humanities and social science disciplines. While the AHA always takes care not to make assumptions about institutional budgets or other constraints, the university has not released any scarcity-based imperatives for this major reorientation of priorities.

We trust that our colleagues in Tulsa's history department have weighed in on the specific implications of this plan for history education at the university. We do note that the plan eliminates a well-established MA/MAT program that from all available evidence has had a significant impact on regional education and public culture.

From the AHA's perspective, however, the most striking aspect of the plan is the elimination of the history department as an independent entity. This is not a matter of turf or fetishized autonomy; it's a matter of disciplinary integrity and the ability of the faculty to mount a coherent curriculum in a discipline. The plan envisions history faculty scattered across one or more thematic divisions, presumably populated by arts, humanities, and social sciences faculty from departments similarly affected by the restructuring. This carries epistemological consequences, but also severs the essential relationship between historians at the University of Tulsa from their colleagues across the country—and from their colleagues who have gone before them in the university. While our members at Tulsa and elsewhere embrace and practice interdisciplinary research and teaching, they also understand the value of disciplinary grounding imperative to high quality teaching and research.

We have seen this approach to reorganization before, usually a cost-cutting measure in the guise of the intellectual virtues of interdisciplinarity. Oddly enough, rhetoric aside, this sort of restructuring often is more a cause of the decline of history enrollments than a result. To maintain a healthy presence in a university a discipline requires intellectual and institutional leadership, something that is difficult to maintain in the kind of structure outlined in *True Commitment*. The impact of this plan on research and pedagogical standards is likely to do serious harm to the practice of history at your institution.

The American Historical Association is America's largest and most prominent organization of professional historians, with over 12,000 members engaged in the teaching and practice of history at colleges and universities, secondary schools, historical institutes, museums, and other institutions. Our role as an advocate for the study of history in all aspects of American intellectual

life does not at all preclude support for initiatives that break down disciplinary boundaries and promote interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work. These are worthy goals and we encourage (and have promoted) efforts in this direction. Interdisciplinarity is not the absence of disciplines, however, but rather their interaction. A thing must exist and have intellectual integrity if it is to interact effectively with another thing. Eliminating departments will weaken, not strengthen, interdisciplinarity.

Our concern extends also to the roles of the department leadership. The AHA offers particular resources to our department chairs because of their central role in promoting and nourishing teaching, learning, and research in history. The University of Tulsa's chair has access to the AHA's online community of department chairs, a particularly active group that enables sharing of data, problem-solving, and conversation about issues ranging from logistics to curriculum. The director of graduate studies in Tulsa's history department has access to a comparable venue as well. It is not at all clear whether these resources would remain available to Tulsa's history leadership if the department is folded into some larger entity.

Sincerely,

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

James Grossman
Executive Director