

December 21, 2021

Dr. Brien Smith, Provost & VP of Academic Affairs
Youngstown State University
Tod Hall, 220
Youngstown, OH 44555
bnsmith06@ysu.edu

Dr. Charles Howell, Dean
Beeghly College of Liberal Arts, Social Sciences and Education
Youngstown State University
DeBartolo Hall, 118
Youngstown, OH 44555
clhowell01@ysu.edu

Dear Dr. Smith and Dr. Howell:

The American Historical Association strongly discourages Youngstown State University from proceeding with the reported nonrenewal of two faculty members in the history program. This sudden reduction, coupled with planned retirements, would severely diminish the department's ability to maintain appropriate pedagogical and research standards, and counteracts the university's own recent assessment of the department's health.

The AHA's concern is not a matter of reflexive protection of employment for individual historians. Our interest lies in the promotion of historical work, historical thinking, and the influence of history in public culture. In this case we are concerned about the quality of undergraduate education and the university's relationship with the Youngstown community. Both stand to suffer from this short-sighted proposal.

The historians on the chopping block apparently have reputations as excellent teachers and scholars. Their value to the history program is but a part of their contributions to the university's larger educational mission.

The AHA has learned that one of these historians, a lecturer who also teaches in YSU Bachelor's Program in General Studies (BGS), has been given an oral notice of termination. This scholar is the assessment coordinator and primary dedicated instructor in the BGS program, which currently has approximately 285 majors. We understand that the second faculty member, a fifth-year tenure-track assistant professor and director of the Center for Judaic and Holocaust Studies, was informed in writing mid-November that he also would not be renewed. He was due to apply for tenure this coming year. His appeal is ongoing and is scheduled for January. We urge the university to reverse each of these termination procedures in the interest of the institution's commitment to high-quality history education.

Eliminating faculty in a core liberal arts degree like history is an especially odd move at a time when civic leaders from all corners of the political landscape have lamented the level of historical knowledge of American citizens. In addition, overwhelming evidence shows that employers seek the kind of skills a history degree can provide. 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.

Implementing the proposed nonrenewals will likely cost YSU far more than any meager financial savings it may bring in the short term. The lecturer would need to be replaced with part-time instructors and an assessment coordinator, which will offset any financial savings. His expertise and personal investment in the two programs will be harder still to replace. The fifth-year tenure-track assistant professor directs the university's Center for Judaic and Holocaust Studies, which includes managing its approximately \$750,000 endowment, which he has creatively leveraged to provide support to other units as well, including Africana Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Hispanic Heritage Month, and YSUnity (LGBTQIA+). Generally, under his direction, the center has flourished as the primary site of interaction between YSU and the local Jewish community. Removing him risks sending a dubious signal about YSU's commitment to this community and reduces interaction, which could diminish the possibility of future financial support. YSU has so far made no announcement regarding how (or even if) it intends to continue the center or use its endowment. Given this center's various roles within and beyond the university, diminishing its activities runs counter to YSU's stated commitment to greater community engagement and to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Youngstown State appears to have recognized the achievements of the history program, BGS, and the Center for Judaic and Holocaust Studies. Earlier this semester, following an audit of YSU's academic programs by outside consultants, the university ranked programs according to a five-tier system: "sunset," "adjust," "sustain," "grow," and "grow plus." The History BA was rated "grow." Although the small history MA was rated "adjust," the BGS program was rated "sustain." None of the programs scheduled for these cuts ranked "sunset."

Rather than applying its own metrics, the leadership of Youngstown State has continued a long-term trend of reductions in history faculty as other retirements or separations have greatly exceeded replacement hires over the past several years. The loss of these two faculty members diminishes the current, total full-time faculty by 17.5%. Coupled with an announced upcoming retirement in the History Program, the loss could reach almost 30% by the end of the current academic year.

These proposed nonrenewals come a little more than a year after a hastily announced and rapidly implemented merger of the History Department with four other departments (Geography, Political Science, Philosophy, and Sociology/Anthropology) into a new larger entity called the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). With the proposed nonrenewals/retrenchments in History (and at least one more elsewhere in HSS), plus upcoming retirements, HSS stands to lose up to 20% of its overall full-time faculty. In light of these sorts of developments, we are concerned about YSU's long-term commitment not just to History, but to the Humanities and Social Sciences more generally.

We urge the YSU administration to reconsider its proposed nonrenewals.

Sincerely,



Jacqueline Jones
President



James R. Grossman
Executive Director