State of the History Major: Data Shows Continued Decline in Degrees Conferred

Some of the most influential people of twentieth-century America were history majors such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Carly Fiorina, Joe Biden, Conan O'Brien, Martha Stewart, Lee Iacocca, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Julia Child.[1] Two U.S. Presidents, Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, even served as president of the American Historical Association.[2] However, over the last ten years, the proportion of History majors on U.S. college campuses has declined. Despite Cal State and nation-wide trends, the history major offers valuable skills for various fields ranging from the humanities to Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM). Due to rapidly changing industries and markets, there is a need for historians who can grasp the big picture and anticipate change.[3] This article compares history enrollment trends at Cal State LA, the surrounding Cal State campuses, as well as national developments to understand the state of the history major and possible reasons for the decline.

Cal State LA and Neighboring CSUs

[1] Carol Symes, "Who Knew? Famous History Majors," Department of History at Illinois, http://www.history.illinois.edu/undergraduate/history/ (accessed March 3, 2016).

[2] "Some Famous History Majors," Department of History at Bethel University, http://cas.bethel.edu/dept/history/famous_majors (accessed February 28, 2016).

[3] Andrew Bennet, "In Defense of a Liberal Arts Degree," Fast Company, April 9, 2014, http://www.fastcompany.com/3028811/in-defense-of-a-liberal-arts-degree (accessed February 21, 2016).

Using data collected from Cal State LA, surrounding Cal State campuses, and nation-wide surveys, we first compare the number of total enrolled students at each Cal State University to the number of students enrolled in their respective History departments.[4] According to Table I, the overall percentage of history students compared to the number of full-time enrolled students at Cal State LA and nearby CSUs has been relatively low since 2006.

Percentage of History Students at CSUs

	Los Angeles		**Dominguez Hills**	
Year	total enrolled/ history (all levels) students	% history students	total enrolled/ history (all levels) students	% history students
Fall 2006	15,415 / 561	3.64%	8,639 / 262	3.03%
Fall 2007	16,542 / 607	3.67%	8,763 / 219	2.50%
Fall 2008	16,337 523	3.20%	8,846 / 213	2.41%
Fall 2009	15,828 / 454	2.87%	10,221 / 258	2.52%
Fall 2010	16,169 / 593	3.67%	10,041 / 244	2.43%
Fall 2011	17,309 / 567	3.28%	10,518 / 237	2.25%

[4] CSU Long Beach and CSU Northridge do not disaggregate numbers; History majors are included under head counts for the departments under which they fall, Liberal Arts and Social and Behavioral Sciences, respectively.

Fall 2012	17,632 / 597	3.39%	10,189 / 203	1.99%
Fall 2013	18,511 / 608	3.28%	10,917 / 206	1.89%
Fall 2014	20,410 / 587	2.88%	10,970 / 237	2.16%

	Fullerton		**Long Beach**	**Northridge**
Year	total enrolled/ history (all levels) students	% history students	total enrolled/ Liberal Arts (all levels) students	total enrolled/ SBS (all levels) students
Fall 2006	11,245 / 191	1.70%	28,577 / 6,331	NA
Fall 2007	12,178 / 208	1.71%	29,799 / 6,782	NA
Fall 2008	11,359 / 171	1.51%	30,893 / 6,904	NA
Fall 2009	9,880 / 166	1.68%	28,882 / 6,341	NA
Fall 2010	10,525 / 155	1.47%	27,170 / 6,065	NA
Fall 2011	9,715 / 161	1.66%	29,096 / 6,781	29,669 / 675
Fall 2012	10,991 / 168	1.53%	29,590 / 7,252	29,182 / 669
Fall 2013	11,776 / 133	1.13%	29,523 / 7,053	31,288 / 601
Fall 2014	10,656 / 132	1.24%	30,656 / 7,580	32,516 / 641

Table 1.[5]

The effects of the Great Recession (2007-2010) are evidenced by the fluctuating numbers of enrollment. The number of B.A. degrees granted in history peaked in 2011 and 2012, with 119 degrees conferred, corresponding to the peak in enrollment from 2007. Cal State LA has had more male (60 percent) than female (40 percent) undergraduate students in the History program since 2006, a ratio that has stayed fairly consistent since.

B.A. History Degrees Granted at Cal State LA

Academic Year	Number of Degrees Granted

[5] CSUF Institutional Research and Analytical Studies, (Fullerton: California State University, Fullerton, 2016), http://www.fullerton.edu/analyticalstudies/student/enrollments/headcountandftes/headlevelmajorcollege.asp (accessed March 1,2016), CSULB Office of Institutional Research, (Long Beach: California State University of Long Beach, 2016), http://daf.csulb.edu/offices/univ_svcs/institutionalresearch/enrollment_trends.html (accessed March 1, 2016), CSUDH Office of Institutional Research, (Dominguez Hills: California State University of Dominguez Hills, 2016), http://www4.csudh.edu/ir/instresources/index (accessed March 1,2016), CSUN Office of Institutional Research, comp. Javier Hidalgo (Northridge: California State University of Northridge, 2016), http://irqry.csun.edu:8080/openweb/csunnumbersindex.html (accessed March 1, 2016).

Spring 2005-Fall 2006	61
Spring 2006-Fall 2007	72
Spring 2007-Fall 2008	73
Spring 2008-Fall 2009	85
Spring 2009-Fall 2010	110
Spring 2010-Fall 2011	119
Spring 2011-Fall 2012	119
Spring 2012-Fall 2013	101
Spring 2013-Fall 2014	76

Table 2.[6]

The chart above shows the number of Bachelor's degrees granted in History at Cal State LA.

National Trends

[6] This data is self reported by students and recorded yearly through GET., http://ir.calstatela.edu/ir/Data/HIST.html.

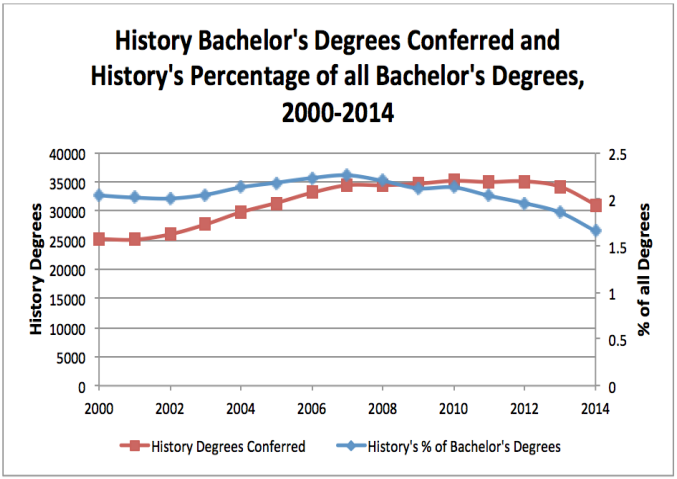


Figure 1. National Center of Education Statistics

The number of History degrees awarded during the 2013-2014 academic year fell nationally for the third consecutive year while the number of degrees earned in all fields continued to rise. Examining the conferred number of undergraduate degrees reveals the discipline's lowest share of earned degrees in over ten years.

According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), history programs conferred 31,106 Bachelor's degrees in 2014, or 9.02 percent fewer degrees compared to the previous year.[7] While it is not clear whether History will see a further decline again, 3,085 fewer students are a dour indicator for the future vitality of the discipline.

[7] Data on new degrees is based on the Digest of Education Statistics compiled by the Department of Education's National Center of Education Statistics, and made available for analysis through the NCES website at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/index.asp.

The representation of students who identify as nonwhite has also changed over the past ten years. In 2013, the number of new, nonwhite History degree recipients passed the 20 percent mark, which is up from 15.8 percent in 2004. A significant number of these new students were Latino, making up 5.5 percent of all degree recipients in 2004 and 9.2 percent in 2013.

In comparison, the number of African American students fell slightly during the same period, from 5.2 percent to 4.8 percent. The percentage of women earning undergraduate degrees has remained consistent with 40.1 percent in 2009 to 40.2 percent in 2013.

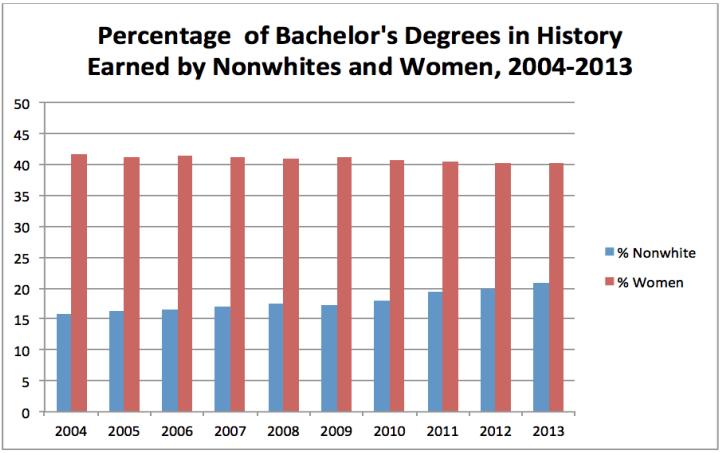


Figure 2. National Center of Education Statistics

Overall the History major is undergoing a slow contraction, which may affect the discipline's ability to claim funding and additional faculty for teaching in the years to come.

History Professionals

Despite the decline in the number of History majors over the past ten years, a degree in the field can open doors to many professional opportunities, as historians are well-rounded graduates with in-demand skills in research, writing, argumentation, and documentation. A growing number of History students choose to pursue graduate programs in careers as lawyers, librarians, writers, archivists, researchers, and teachers. Additional career choices for undergraduate History students include work in journalism, public relations, technical writing, and administration, as well as domestic and foreign government service for organizations such as the FBI or CIA.

Average Salary Levels for History and All Fields, 1986–87 to 2011–12[8]

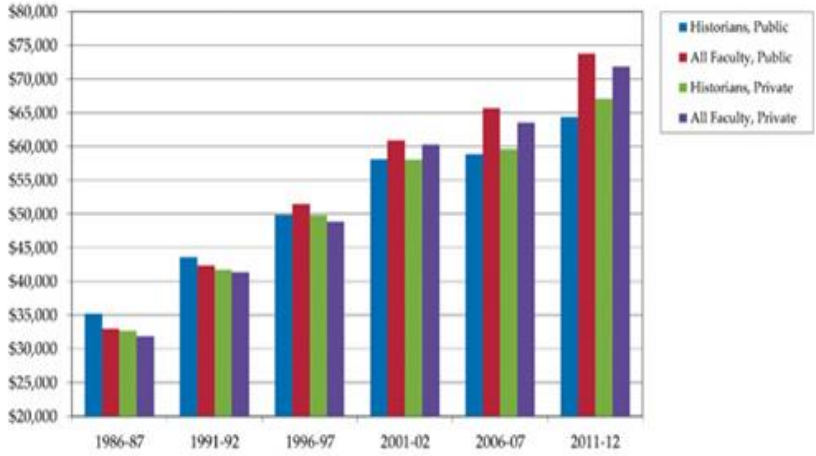


Figure 3.

[8] Robert B. Townsend, "History Salaries Lag Behind Inflation and the Rest of Academia," *Perspectives on History*, May 2012, http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2012/history-salaries-lag-behind-inflation-and-the-rest-of-academia (accessed February 28, 2016).

A cross-disciplinary analysis shows that Historians in private and public institutions earned an average of $65,000 per year while all faculty earned up to $74,000, making History Professors the lowest paid in both public and private colleges.

Conclusion

What then, is the current state of the History major? The nationwide contraction may be a cause for concern. At the same time, the number of Latinos majoring in History suggests good news. Moreover, women remain consistently active in the major. Finally, while the salaries of History professors reveal a marked income disparity, students can use their degrees to work in many other fields of employment. If History as a major is to remain healthy, then we must become involved in its continued recruitment and revitalization.

Jessica Bravo
Daniel Garcia
Azamat Lachinov
Megan Lange