

## Downsizing Hits Home

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### Article:

On a gloomy October day in 1995, the chair of the University of Wyoming's history department summoned all graduate students in the department to a meeting. He announced that the doctoral program no longer existed. To say that we were shocked would be an understatement. Graduate students had no warning of this decision; had we known this was coming, some of us would have attempted to transfer before the semester began. Twelve PhD students faced a tough choice—either finish the requirements under a "grandfather" clause and risk losing funding, or leave the school. Despite reassurances that all assistance possible would be given to those of us who wished to transfer to another university, the department refused to pay even for postage on letters of inquiry to other schools. Such a contradiction between words and actions characterized the entire affair.

What we graduate students were told often turned out to be inaccurate. The dean of arts and sciences claimed that the history faculty preferred abolishing the PhD. But the department's faculty divided sharply over whether to end the program, with a majority siding against the decision. Moreover, the university administration expressed displeasure that the issue became public. If it was a good decision, why were they upset with publicity? Wyoming citizens questioned the decision to eliminate the PhD program, but the university administrators defended their actions as unavoidable.

Naturally, the main administrative justification for abolishing the program emphasized a lack of financial resources. Some of the graduate students and faculty members suggested narrowing the PhD program's focus to western American history. Most students had come to the university to study this field, and the university owns a rich collection of manuscripts and secondary sources on the history of the American West. Such a change in focus would have had the additional effect of reducing the cost for a program that had attempted to maintain resources to support the study of all aspects of American and European history. The administration ignored this recommendation, despite the fact that the board of trustees postponed a vote on the downsizing decision for more than two months. The administration stifled or ignored further debate over the issue, and students and faculty both felt powerless against this stonewalling. Given the short time frame between the downsizing announcement and the final decision, there seemed little we could achieve.

### A Trend Defined

In December 1995 I transferred to another school. The most disturbing discovery about this experience was the number of others who have encountered similar situations at their schools. At many colleges and universities faculty and graduate students endure cutbacks, increased workloads, loss of benefits, stagnant salaries, and temporary contract employment.<sup>1</sup> Many history departments experienced the elimination of degree programs, loss of funding, reduction in library acquisitions, administrative refusal to fill teaching vacancies on a full-time basis, and attacks on the tenure system. Meanwhile, student enrollments have increased markedly in the past two decades at most state and private universities. This, along with a reluctance to hire new faculty, contributed to a worsened student-teacher ratio in the classroom. Inexplicably, tuition costs rose well beyond the annual inflation rate during the same period. When I talked to old friends in the profession, as well as new ones that I met while participating in the panel on downsizing, I encountered pervasive anger and resentment.

At many colleges and universities, administrators blamed reduced state funding, the cost of new technology, or other perceived budget shortfalls for assaults on the academic segments of their schools. If the budget crisis is real and not merely contrived, however, how can college presidents, deans, chancellors, and provosts rationalize new buildings on campus (without the new professors to fill them), expansion of (or new) sports arenas, and growth in administrative positions and programs? Should we be pleased with priorities such as these?<sup>2</sup> At its root, the entire downsizing phenomenon is a fight over the direction and purpose of higher education in America. Space does not allow a full analysis of those debates here, but several points seem particularly important. Is education the primary purpose of colleges and universities? If so, why are academic departments the first struck when the budget ax falls? There is a need to reduce duplication and to make departments more fiscally efficient, but should that involve cutting programs to the point of irrelevance? If the survival of a school is at stake, all segments of the college community must contribute to its survival. Often, university presidents claim that alumni desire to give money only to athletic and structural improvements, but when did they last attempt a capital fund drive focused on academics? They need to try.

Another fight rages over the place of history and the humanities in the future academy. Is the study of history still meaningful to contemporary society? Seemingly, every week in the mainstream media we read yet another diatribe on the irrelevance of humanities programs in an increasingly technological world. Parents and undergraduates express reluctance to invest tens of thousands of dollars in an education that fails to provide a well-paying job at the end. If it was true that one cannot get a job with history as a major, we can hardly blame them. We in the profession know better, but how well do we communicate to nonhistorians the value of critical thinking and writing skills? Occasionally, even corporate CEOs call for reemphasis on a well-rounded education empowering students (and future workers) with the ability to think on the move. The study of history provides those skills.

As everyone who reads *Perspectives* understands, examination of history also strengthens a healthy and open society in which the past is subject to constant reinterpretation. We, as historians, make easy targets for misrepresentation because so few people outside of the profession understand what we do. Perhaps we could do a better job connecting with the general public through our writings and conversations. Primary and secondary school history education needs also needs our support.<sup>3</sup>

### *Should We Respond?*

What can be done about these debilitating trends? I humbly offer two methods of response. First, I would recommend enhanced communication to start the ball rolling. Everyone connected with a history department as professor, instructor, teaching assistant, student, or support staff should communicate with one another. Not only should downsizing issues be openly discussed among colleagues, we should also build connections with other departments and universities as well. Before now, how many of us had heard about the elimination of PhD programs at the University of Wyoming and several Ohio and California universities? What about the effort to abolish tenure at such places as the University of Minnesota?<sup>4</sup> Or of the recent successful unionization efforts of graduate students at the University of Kansas and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell? Historians should not learn from the Nation that Iowa's teaching assistants recently gained union recognition, earned a pay increase, and acquired health benefits.<sup>5</sup> Such stories, and I'm sure there are more, should appear in our professional journals.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, links between workers, students, and faculty on campus may provide the power needed to confront the entrenched strength of the administrative apparatus. Also, we should not forget to contact our elected representatives, especially at the state level. The future of history's role in the wider society will involve them as much as any university president. Many of the H-Net listserv sites already discuss downsizing in addition to research and pedagogical concerns. Why not set one up to deal exclusively with workplace issues? Historians can learn about what is happening elsewhere, offer assistance, and benefit from others' mistakes and successes.

Second, I would recommend that faculty members and graduate students deserve a role in setting university and college priorities. We are workers, whether one likes that label or not, which means that we have a great deal in common in trying to maintain and improve our employment conditions. As teachers and students, we exercise

negligible control over school budgets. There is a demonstrated need for democratizing the decisionmaking process and resetting administrative priorities. Secretive decrees handed down from above incite anger and disdain. Therefore, we ought to consider unionization as a strategy to empower us as workers and to return some sanity to the financial decisions of colleges and universities.<sup>7</sup> Only then, it appears, will administrators listen.

Another proposed solution to many of these downsizing problems—reducing the number of PhDs granted throughout the country—requires comment. What problem is actually solved by playing into the hands of current administrative policy? How is the expanding trend of temporary contract employment reversed by lessening the labor pool? Will instructors attain improved working conditions through such a strategy? Is increased homogenization, through reduction of the number of PhD-granting institutions, sound policy in a world of multicultural concerns and needs? Downsizing in all of its manifestations requires a more fundamental, and ultimately healthier, opposition. Can we tolerate less?

### Conclusion

In retrospect, what started as a disaster ended up quite well for me. The scholar who I went to Wyoming to work with left the university for another appointment months before the downsizing episode. Having no incentive to stay, I landed on my feet in a high-quality program with an extremely supportive faculty. In some ways this episode was a blessing in disguise. Yet I continue to hear talk of impending hiring freezes, loss of TA lines, increased work loads, and elimination of history as a required discipline. When will it end?

In the 10 months or so since I originally brought these thoughts together, several important developments lead me to think that we may have rounded a corner. Employment-related topics appeared in *Perspectives*, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and even in an exposé of history graduate student life in *Spin Magazine*,<sup>8</sup> Social Text devoted a recent issue to "Academic Labor" and found, among other pertinent points, that college administrations increasingly concentrate authority in their own hands.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most impressive progress occurred at the University of Virginia. On the heels of a "teach-in" with organized labor in March, a rally by faculty, graduate students, clerical employees, and houseworkers took place on September 16. The Teamsters and the AFL-CIO participated in making demands that salaries provide a living wage and that graduate employees and other workers should have some job security. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein played a crucial organizing role.<sup>10</sup> At the time of this writing, the impact of these efforts remains unclear.

I want to emphasize that my concerns about downsizing derive from the harm suffered by the entire profession, but that harm fell particularly hard on Wyoming's doctoral students, some of whom dropped out of school altogether. I know the fate of only two other Wyoming doctoral students who managed to continue their studies; one is finishing her dissertation while teaching full-time at a community college, and the other works patiently to finish his degree at another institution. We may all surface in better condition than if we had stayed in Laramie, but my hope is that the nation's other graduate students will avoid the downsizing flood.

### Notes

1. See, for example, Roark Atkinson, "Adjunct Faculty: A Buyer's Market," *OAH Newsletter* 24 (Nov. 1996): 1-10.
2. As former California Governor Jerry Brown said: "Why in the world are salaries higher for administrators when the basic mission is teaching?" in James Charlton, ed., *A Little Learning Is a Dangerous Thing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 98.
3. See especially Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, eds., *Historical Literacy! The Case for History in American Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989).
4. Kinley Brauer, "The Tenure Crisis at Minnesota," *OAH Newsletter* 24 (Nov. 1996): 3.
5. Leslie Taylor, Doug Anderson, and David Colman, "Student Union," *The Nation* 263 (Dec. 16, 1996): 5-6.
6. In fairness, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently carried a piece on teaching assistant unionization efforts (Tamara Joseph and Jon Curtiss, "Why Professors Should Support Graduate-

Student Unions," 43 [Feb. 21, 1997]: B-6); and there *was a* discussion in *Lingua Franca* about efforts to unite academics and labor unions to combat university reliance on temporary instructors (Michael Tomasky, "Waltzing with Sweeney," 7, [Feb. 1997]: 40-47).

7. See, for example, Gregory M. Beyrer, "In Favor of Unions for Graduate Students," *Perspectives* 35 (Jan. 1997): 29-34; and Joseph and Curtiss, "Why Professors Should Support Graduate-Student Unions."
8. Vernon Horn, "Forging New Ties to Labor: Reformulating the Academic-Labor Coalition," *Perspectives* 35 (May/June 1997): 35-37; Anthony A. Iaccarino, "Rethinking the Role of History Graduate Programs," in *ibid*, 38-40; Joyce Appleby, "Is the Marketplace Too Much with *Us*?" *Perspectives* 35 (Sept. 1997): 2-6; Courtney Leatherman, "As Teaching Assistants Push to Unionize, Debate Grows Over What They Would Gain," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 44 (October 3, 1997): A12-A13; and *Spin* (October 1997) 120-127.
9. *Social Text* (Summer 1997) no. 51.
10. Maria Saniminitelli, "Rally Targets Treatment of U.Va. Workers," *The Daily Progress* (Charlottesville, Virginia) Wednesday, September 17, 1997.