

Alfred University finds its undergraduate history major bucking a national trend

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Mallory Szymanski (left) and Andrew Kless

ALFRED, NY—Recent surveys of declining history majors at U.S. colleges and universities paint a discouraging portrait of waning interest in the undergraduate study of history. Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates a nearly 34-percent decline in the number of history majors from 2011 to 2017.

Benjamin Schmidt, director of Digital Humanities and a clinical associate professor of history at New York University, has linked the decline in part to economic stresses following the Great Recession of 2008. Schmidt also notes a larger downward trend in history majors since a peak at the end of the 1960s: the decline was especially steep through the 1970s and into the mid 1980's, when the share of history majors among all U.S. bachelor's degrees dropped to approximately two percent. That share began rising into the 1990's, then began dropping again following the 2008 recession.

Two history professors at Alfred University, a private university in western New York, recently compiled figures that show the history major at that institution tracking national trends until about two years ago, at which point the number of history majors at Alfred University began rising. Both newly hired assistant history professors, Mallory Szymanski and Andrew Kless note the number of history majors at the University dropped from 21 in 2012 to nine in 2017. The numbers shot up to 21 in 2018, and in the current academic year, the University's Division of Human Studies, in which history is included, counts 31 history majors. Alfred University currently enrolls approximately 1,520 undergraduate students, according to the University Registrar.

There are numerous possible explanations for the sudden increase, and some point to issues that are unique to Alfred University. For example, both Kless and Szymanski were hired following a period in which the number of full-time history professors had declined and the positions were not immediately filled. A senior history professor at the University suggests "fresh faces" go a long way towards attracting majors.

Interviews with both Szymanski and Kless indicate additional factors that may be of value to other academic institutions considering their own declining history majors.

Alfred University lists more than 35 history courses currently offered by its Division of Human Studies. The courses include many that focused on particular periods (The Ancient Greeks; The Roman World; Post-World War II America; survey courses in American history). Other courses focused on subjects and historical themes (Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, Hitler; Medieval Cultures; Visions of Modernity: Art, Politics and Ideas).

Since their arrival at Alfred University, Kless and Szymanski have designed numerous new courses that reflect their interests and scholarship: Putin's Russia, Modern China, and The History of Modern Fascism for Kless; History of Sexuality; Asylums and Therapy; Women's History for Szymanski. In addition, Kless and Szymanski team-taught a new course they designed called Historian's Craft, which engaged students directly in methods of historical study.

There was an element of simple marketing in the conception and design of the courses, according to Szymanski. She notes, for example, her own course, Asylums and Therapy, appealing strongly to psychology majors. At the same time, she adds, the courses contain familiar historical content.

"The catchy title is important for getting them in the door. Then you can tell them, 'Okay, now you have to read these books.' We do teach the fundamentals; it's just a different way of capturing your audience."

Their team-taught course, Historian's Craft, is a case in point. They describe the course as an introduction "to the basic tools of studying history." In addition, they engage students in the process of building historical arguments using historical evidence. Writing and re-writing exercises are common, so that students learn, Szymanski says, "an argument doesn't fly off the top of your head."

Kless says the new courses also engage students by emphatically demonstrating a connection between historical study and current events. His newly designed course Putin's Russia bears an obvious connection between recent Russian history and current events, as does his course on Fascism.

Finally, both professors have borrowed an old chestnut from elementary and secondary education: the class trip. Kless organized a trip from Alfred, NY, to Ottawa, Canada, for his class Empire, 1415-Present. Szymanski joined in the planning and accompanied Kless and the students, in part because she wanted to learn how to organize an extended class trip for her upcoming Black History course (she intended to take her students to Washington DC; the COVID-19 emergency interrupted plans for the 2020 spring semester). The trip to Canada involved a particular challenge in that students were required to carry either passports or other identification that permitted crossing the U.S.-Canadian border. Kless secured the funds to pay for passports and enhanced driver's licenses through special funding pools available at the University.

Professor of Philosophy Emrys Westacott, who chairs Alfred University's Division of Human Studies, points to the fresh course offerings as a likely draw for undergraduates considering a history class, some of whom indeed decide to become history majors (the Human Studies Division also offers a history minor). In addition, Westacott says the simple presence of new faces on the history faculty helps attract students, although hiring new faculty members is not always an option for other history departments.

"There's no doubt that Mallory and Andrew have injected new life into our history program with creatively designed courses and teaching methods," Westacott says. "Young people are drawn to classes like Andrew's, which give them a more international perspective, and classes like Mallory's, which deepen their understanding of their own society through becoming acquainted with voices and perspectives that have been marginalized in the past."

Westacott's observation, together with Alfred University's recent growth in history majors, supports an insight common among history teachers: Students' recognition of links between historical events and their lives in the modern setting animates and energizes their study of history. At Alfred University, that revitalization emerged, at least in part, from a re-examination of course offerings by history faculty, and a willingness on the part of that faculty to design fresh courses for the curriculum.