

FIGHTING THE CIVIL WAR IN THE CLASSROOM: High School Outreach at LSU

Zevi Gutfreund

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Feature Essay

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“High School Outreach at LSU”

Undergraduates’ attitudes about learning history have been shaped long before they matriculate to university. Many students do not like the rote memorization that some high school history courses still require. Many others have a fascination with the past but are discouraged from studying history by their families and growing public opinion that career prospects in fields associated with history are dwindling. Still others satisfy their history requirements with Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment classes in high school and never take a college history course. These are some of the causes for the declining rate of history majors in American universities, as reported in the March 2016 issue of *Perspectives on History*. Two months later, that journal published a set of general guidelines that history professors can follow to boost enrollment in the coming years.

At Louisiana State University, the history department has launched a range of recruiting projects. This includes writing letters to prospective students, sending faculty members to monthly application orientations, and redesigning the lower-division curriculum to encourage more first-years to try a history course. Along with these ventures came an enthusiastic outreach effort to teachers and students at high schools in Baton Rouge and South Louisiana. The department decided to do this because, since students declare their majors before they enroll at LSU, many never consider taking a history course. We hoped to change this perception by working with high school teachers to introduce their students to the exciting ways they can study history in a university setting.

This effort is possible because the department has a concentration in secondary education, called the *Geaux Teach* program. This allows students to graduate from LSU in four years with a B.A. in history and certification to teach

social studies in Louisiana schools. Geaux Teach provided the department with a list of more than 100 alumni who teach in local schools, along with other social studies teachers who serve as mentors to current undergraduates. The high school outreach committee has visited classrooms in five Baton Rouge schools and plans to visit more in the future. We solicited these meetings in part to expand our recruiting efforts, but in the process a larger collaboration between university and high school teachers has begun. Initially, we offered to provide the expertise and resources of LSU faculty to our colleagues in secondary education. But those meetings showed that academic historians can learn just as much about instruction and technology from speaking with high school teachers.

Those campus visits turned into engaging discussions with teachers who shared our goal of getting students excited about studying the past. We began with a simple question: how can we, as academic historians, help teachers prepare their students for college history courses? The teachers had many ideas that helped our plan of action. Although many were LSU alumni, they felt disconnected from the academic community of their alma mater. So we have created a Listserv to notify alumni, teachers, and anyone who is interested about guest speakers and other department events. Others expressed interest in returning to campus to observe undergraduate lectures—both to satisfy their own passion for history as well as to study the teaching strategies of their favorite professors. So we organized an LSU History Teachers' Day to coincide with the professional development date for the East Baton Rouge Parish school district. Twenty-five teachers came to hear lectures, meet with faculty, and brainstorm future collaborations. In addition to existing courses, the teachers asked if professors would give supplemental lectures on their areas of expertise. As a result, we now have a list of twenty lectures that faculty are happy to give, about topics ranging from "Slavery and Race Relations in the World of Ancient Greece" to "Cold War Berlin and the Fall of the Wall" to "The Statue of Liberty in U.S. Immigration Debates." Our colleagues have volunteered to give these lectures to school groups who visit LSU, or even to visit the students in their high school classrooms if that is more convenient.

The culmination of this outreach has been inviting school groups to campus for an LSU History Day. Students (many of them taking Advanced Placement classes) observe lectures in survey courses alongside current undergraduates. Then they attend lessons about specialized topics. (These lessons usually come from the list of faculty lectures, but we are willing to work with teachers to design a lesson that fits their students' current curriculum). At lunch, a panel of

undergraduates explain why they chose to major in history and answer the high school students' questions about coursework and their career plans after graduation. While many students most enjoy hearing from current college students, others enjoy their trip to the Hill Memorial Library, where they have their first experience working with original documents from a special collections archive. Five high schools have visited so far, and they were enjoyable experiences for the students, the classroom teachers, and the professors. We would like to think that this outreach is one of the reasons for the slight increase in applications for history majors in 2016-17. More importantly, the visits have given us the opportunity to share our passion for studying history on the LSU campus to the next generation of young people in South Louisiana.

There have been other benefits from this collaboration as well. We now have a community of local teachers whom we contact for other resources. The Secondary Education concentration has invited these teachers to meet current student-teachers and share advice about the perils and pleasures of their first year as full-time teachers. High school teachers are often more familiar with the latest teaching practices, from the "flipped classroom" to the use of new technology. Local teachers have shared ideas that range from programs that make Power Points and Clicker Questions more interactive to assignments that replace traditional five-paragraph essays with website projects that require students to show critical thinking in new ways. This outreach is so exciting because our colleagues at LSU have a chance to learn as much from this dialogue as the high school teachers and students who visit campus.

Of course, these educational benefits only reinforce our recruiting efforts. For example, students and families may be more willing to consider a history major if we can show that they will learn skills like web design in our courses. And we can use our new Listserv to send high school teachers our course catalogue and encourage their best students to try a history course in their first year at LSU. Teachers and alumni were excited to see how our list of course offerings continues to grow, and we are excited to learn more about how students learn history before enrolling at LSU. This collaboration with high school teachers was motivated by falling enrollment numbers, but it has rejuvenated the attitudes of historians and instructors at every level in our community.

Zevi Gutfreund is an Assistant Professor of History at Louisiana State University and the department's Secondary Education Advisor. He is also the co-author of Home Lands, How Women Made the West: A Teaching Unit,

Grade Range 4-12 (2010).