

The Vanishing Past: Exploring the Rise and Decline of The History Major Since 1950

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Research Question

- What led to the rise in the number of History majors from 1950-1975? Furthermore, since the 80s, why has the History major fallen to its lowest point of enrollment today?

Main Argument

- The Black Campus Movement allowed universities to break free of the McCarthy era and saw increased enrollment of students
- More of a focus was given to hiring black faculty and teaching black history, heightening the popularity of History departments
- The Reagan Administration saw massive cuts in federal funding to universities causing increased tuition and student loan debt. This created a culture among students to pursue more “career-oriented” majors in business or STEM shifting focus away from fields in the Humanities, especially History

Black Campus Movement

- Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 marked the start of the Civil Rights Movement
- President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing discrimination based on race, gender, and religion
- 1965 began the Black Campus Movement where African-American students and professors demanded new ideas on minorities in higher education and the creation of African-American studies departments with more diverse faculty
- College campuses also saw many movements on campuses protesting the Vietnam war
- According to historian Martha Biondi most of these movements were focused on African-American inclusion, not Vietnam
- This led to increased numbers of African-American faculty and students at both traditionally black and white colleges
- The first Ethnic Studies departments were created and in 1970 Black History Month was established

Reagan Era

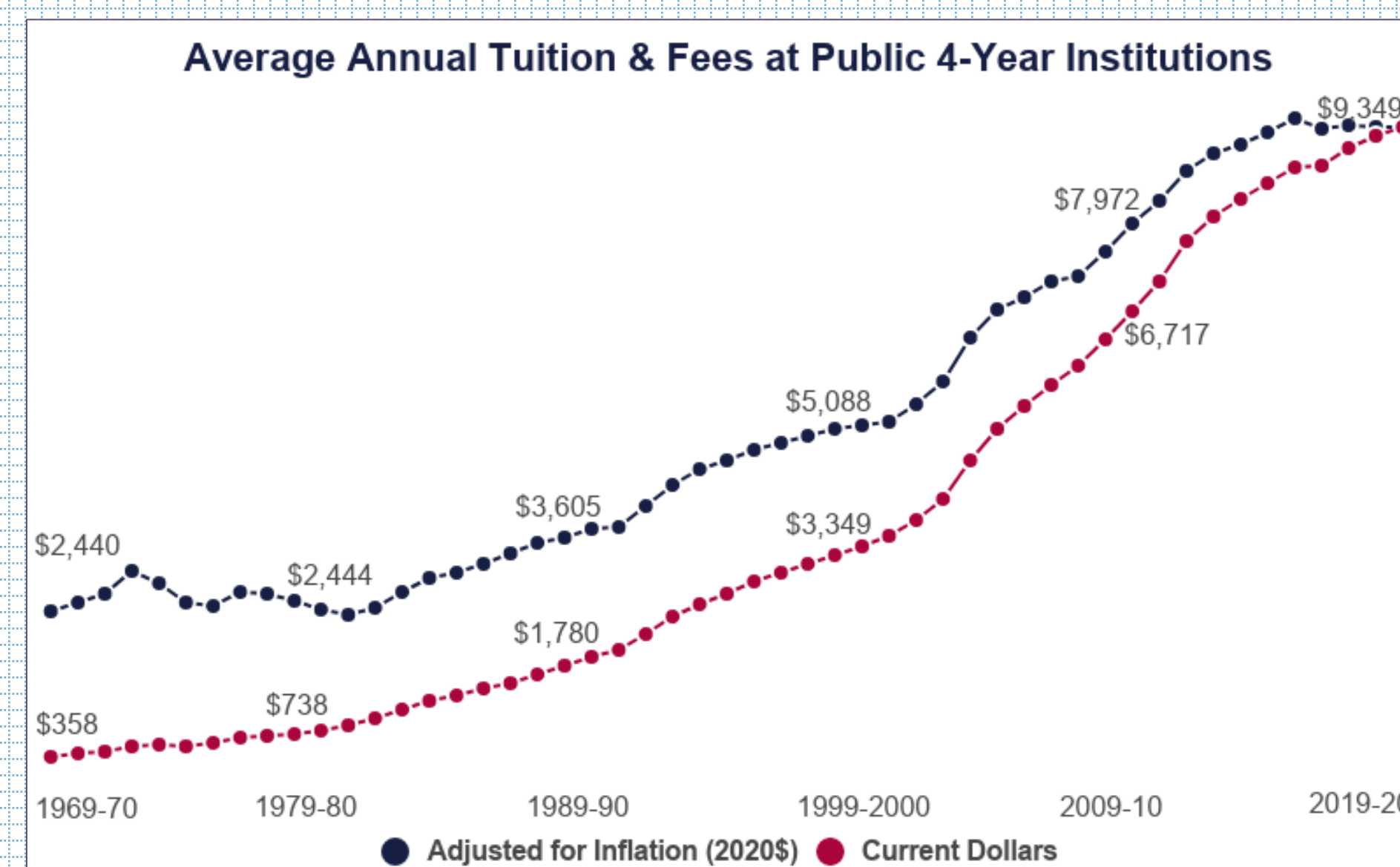
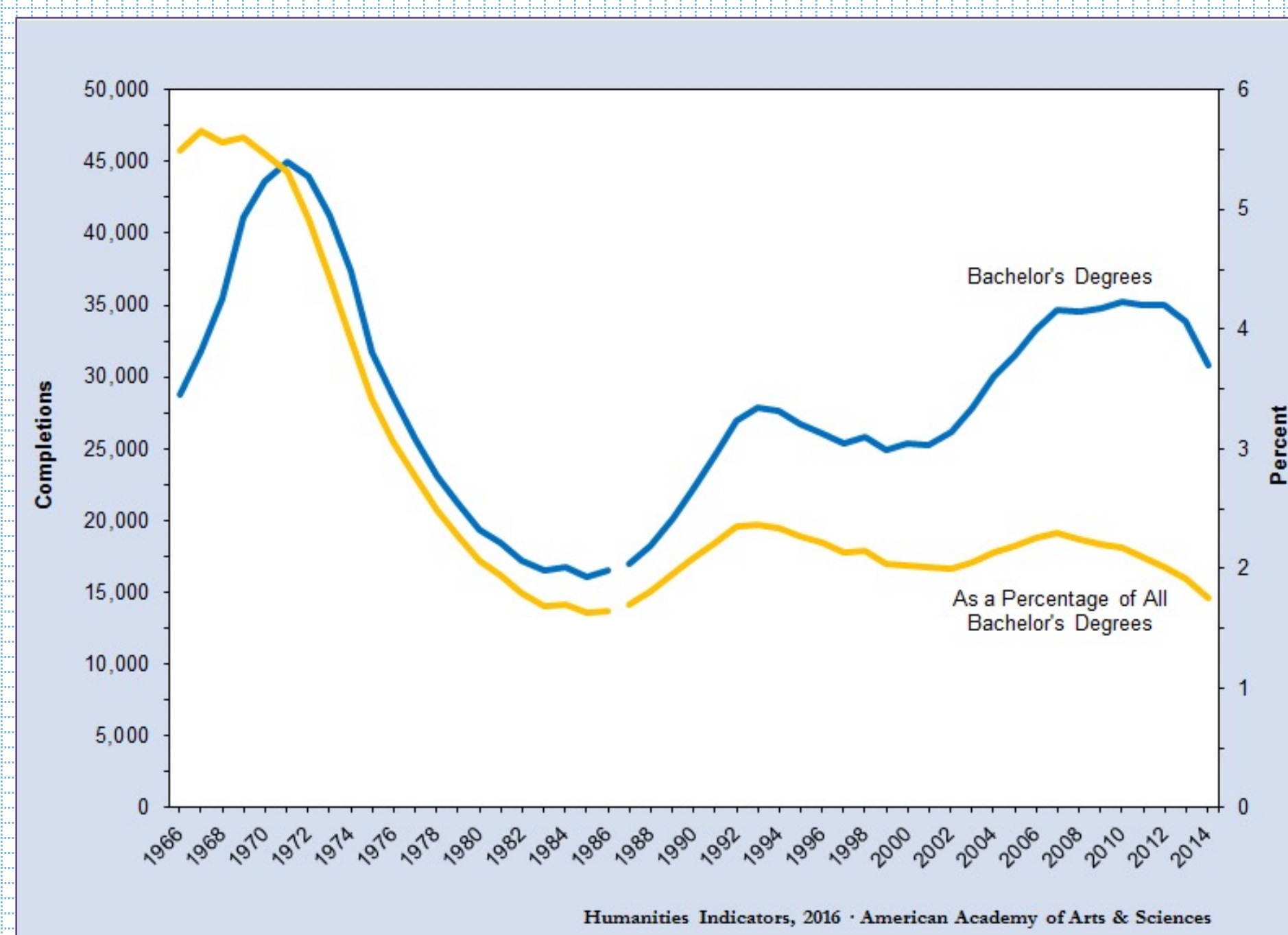
- Ronald Reagan's time as California governor from 1967 to 1975 foreshadowed his presidential policies
- He called for an end to free tuition for state college and university students
- Reagan demanded 20% cuts in higher education spending every year
- Reagan's presidential administration from 1981 to 1989 saw federal higher education spending cut by half
- In fact, by his second term he abandoned new policies on higher education and only focused on lower spending
- According to Gary K. Clabaugh, a professor of education at La Salle University, Reagan's policies “suggested that it was far more important for schools to turn out good employees than to produce decent citizens...”
- During this period, business degrees rose by 50,000, computer science degrees doubled, and all humanities degrees saw declines

21st Century

- The Advanced Placement (AP) system allowed students to take history classes in high school before ever getting the chance to take actual college history courses
- The 90s started a precedent of only teaching to the AP exam instead of learning, or doing, actual history
- The National Science Foundation created the acronym STEM in 2001
- In 2009, President Barack Obama established the Educate to Innovate Initiative which sought to prepare 100,000 STEM teachers by 2021 and increase federal funding of STEM education programs
- There has been an increase in negative stigmatization of History majors, especially by STEM majors, claiming that History classes are just “easy As”
- Covid-19 destroyed the US economy which pushed more students towards “career oriented” majors

Key Data

- 1950-1970 History BAs grew from 13,542 to 43,386 (+2.5% growth among all majors)
- 1969-1970 to 1979-1980 school year the total cost of attendance grew 88%
- 1970-1985 saw a massive drop in History BAs from 45,000 to about 13,000
- 1969-1970 to 1999-2000 school year saw tuition and fees rise by 790.5%
- This same period saw the student debt-to-income ratio grow from 10.8% to 43.6%
- In fifty years, the total national student loan debt has outgrown the US dollar by 543.9%
- 2008-2017 History majors dropped from 34,642 to 24,266
- Compared to all other majors History has fallen farther than any other since the 2008 financial crisis



Black Campus Movement

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21st Century

