

Recasting History



Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?

A Study of U.S. History Courses at the
University of Texas and Texas A&M University

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A study sponsored by the Texas Association of Scholars and
the National Association of Scholars' Center for the Study of the Curriculum

Executive Summary

In 1971, the state of Texas enacted a legislative requirement that students at public institutions complete two courses in American history. With that mandate in mind, the Texas Association of Scholars and the National Association of Scholars' Center for the Study of the Curriculum proposed to determine how students today meet the requirement, and what history departments offer as a means of doing so. What courses can students take, and what vision of U.S. history do those courses present? This study is the result of our investigation.

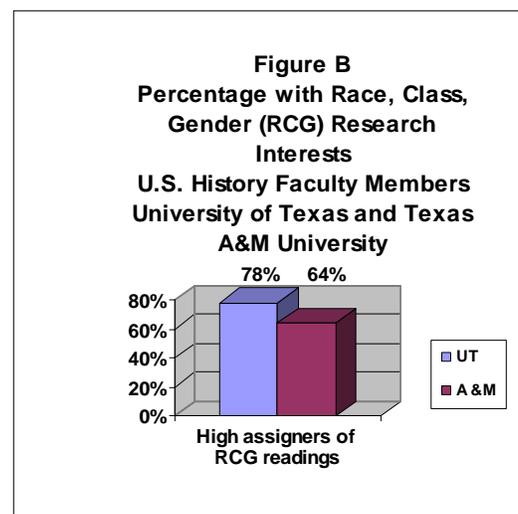
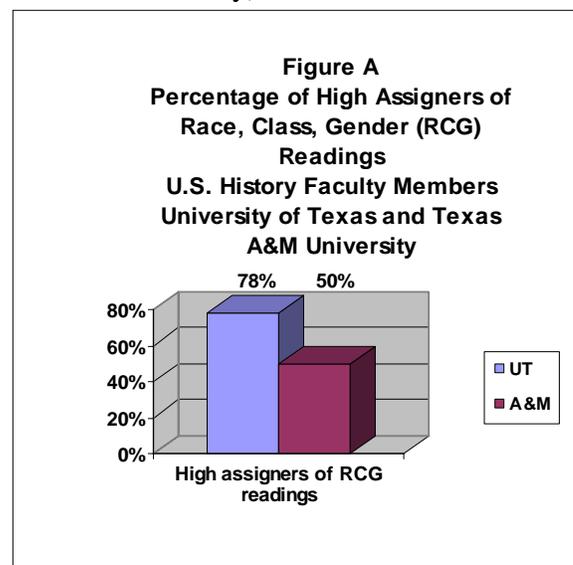
Our report focuses on the University of Texas at Austin (UT) and Texas A&M University at College Station (A&M), flagship institutions serving large undergraduate populations. For this study we examined all 85 sections of lower-division American history courses at A&M and UT in the Fall 2010 semester that satisfied the U.S. history requirement. We looked at the assigned readings for each course and the research interests of the forty-six faculty members who taught them. We also compared faculty members' research interests with the readings they chose to assign.

We found that all too often the course readings gave strong emphasis to race, class, or gender (RCG) social history, an emphasis so strong that it diminished the attention given to other subjects in American history (such as military, diplomatic, religious, intellectual history). The result is that these institutions frequently offered students a less-than-comprehensive picture of U.S. history. We found, however, that the situation was far more problematic at the University of Texas than at Texas A&M University.

We classified course readings by how much they focused on race, class, and gender. Course sections with half or more of their content having an RCG focus were classified as high; those with 25 to 49 percent having an RCG focus were classified as moderate; and those with less than 25 percent having an RCG focus were classified as limited. We classified faculty members assigning primarily high RCG readings as "high assigners" of RCG materials.

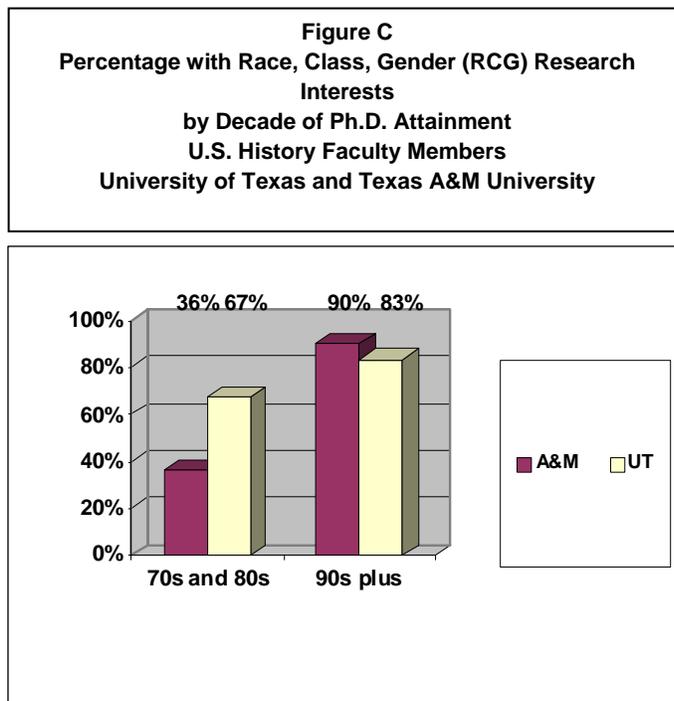
Major findings:

- **High emphasis on race, class, and gender in reading assignments**
78 percent of UT faculty members were high assigners of RCG readings;
50 percent of A&M faculty members were high assigners of RCG readings.
- **High level of race, class, and gender research interests among faculty members teaching these courses**
78 percent of UT faculty members had special research interests in RCG;



64 percent of A&M faculty members had special research interests in RCG.

- **More recent Ph.D.s are more likely to focus research on race, class, and gender**
83 percent of UT faculty members teaching these courses who received their Ph.D.s in the 90s or later had RCG research interests, while only 67 percent of UT faculty members who received their Ph.D.s in the 70s or 80s had RCG research interests. 90 percent of A&M faculty members teaching these courses who received their Ph.D.s in the 90s or later had RCG research interests, while only 36 percent of A&M faculty members who received their Ph.D.s in the 70s or 80s had RCG research interests.



There were institutional differences in the associations between research interests and reading assignments. At A&M, those with RCG research interests were significantly higher assigners of RCG reading assignments than those without such RCG research interests. On the other hand, there was no such relationship at UT. At UT, both RCG and non-RCG research-focused faculty members were predominately high assigners of RCG readings.

The extent to which UT faculty members gave high assignments of RCG readings—whether or not they had special RCG research interests, and regardless of when they received their Ph.D.s—suggests that the culture in an institution and its history department plays a greater role than other factors in influencing reading assignment choices. Additionally, a much higher percentage of UT faculty members teaching survey courses made high RCG assignments than survey course teachers at A&M.

An inordinate focus on RCG isn't the only problem. As RCG emphases crowd out other aspects and themes in American history, we find other problems setting in, including the narrow tailoring of "special topics" courses and the absence of significant primary source documents. Special topics courses used by students to fulfill the history requirement lack historical breadth; they seem to exist mainly to allow faculty members to teach their special interests. In those courses and in more general courses, too, faculty members failed to assign many key documents from American history, for example, none of them assigning the Mayflower Compact, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, or the Civil Rights Act. Moreover, reading assignments contained nothing about figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas A. Edison, the Wright brothers, or the scientists of the Manhattan Project.

These trends extend beyond the two flagship Texas universities. History departments at other universities around the United States share similar characteristics, such as faculty members' narrow specializations; high emphasis on race, class, and gender; exclusion of key concepts; and failure to provide broad coverage of U.S. history.

If colleges and universities are to provide students with full and sound knowledge of American history, some things need to change. Teachers of American history should take race, class, and gender into account and should help students understand those aspects of our history, but those perspectives should not take precedence over all others.

We offer ten recommendations:

- I. **Review the curriculum.** History departments should review existing curricula, eliminate inappropriate over-emphases, and repair gaps and under-emphases.
- II. **If necessary, convene an external review.** If history departments are unwilling to undertake such a review, deans, provosts, or trustees need to consider an external review.
- III. **Hire faculty members with a broader range of research interests.** Hiring committees should employ new faculty members who have a solid understanding of the broad narrative of American history.
- IV. **Keep broad courses broad.** Survey and introductory courses should give comprehensive overviews.
- V. **Identify essential reading.** As a safeguard against overlooking essential material, history department members should collaborate to develop lists of readings that the department expects students at a given course level to study.
- VI. **Design better courses.** Departments should promote the development of courses that contribute to a robust, evenhanded, and reasonably complete curriculum.
- VII. **Diversify graduate programs.** Graduate programs in U.S. history should ensure that they do not unduly privilege themes of race, class, and gender.
- VIII. **Evaluate conformity with laws.** Other states should enact laws similar to the Texas requirement that students complete two courses in American history, but better accountability is needed to ensure that colleges' teaching lines up with legal provisions.
- IX. **Publish better books.** Publishers should publish textbooks and anthologies that more adequately represent the full range of U.S. history.
- X. **Depoliticize history.** Historians and professors of United States history should counter mission creep by returning to their primary task: handing down the American story, as a whole, to future generations.