

June 2, 2015

Letter Opposing the 2014 APUSH Framework

The teaching of American history in our schools faces a grave new risk, from an unexpected source. Half a million students each year take the Advanced Placement (AP) exam in U.S. History. The framework for that exam has been dramatically changed, in ways certain to have negative consequences.

We wish to express our opposition to these modifications. The College Board's 2014 Advanced Placement Examination shortchanges students by imposing on them an arid, fragmentary, and misleading account of American history. We favor instead a robust, vivid, and content-rich account of our unfolding national drama, warts and all, a history that is alert to all the ways we have disagreed and fallen short of our ideals, while emphasizing the ways that we remain one nation with common ideals and a shared story.

The Advanced Placement exam has become a fixture in American education since its introduction after the Second World War, and many colleges and universities award credits based on students' AP scores. In fact, for many American students the AP test effectively has taken the place of the formerly required U.S. history survey course in colleges and universities, making its structure and contents a matter of even greater importance from the standpoint of civic education. Many of these students will never take another American history course. So it matters greatly what they learn in their last formal encounter with the subject.

Educators and the public have been willing to trust the College Board to strike a sensible balance among different approaches to the American past. Rather than issuing detailed guidelines, the College Board has in the past furnished a brief topical outline for teachers, leaving them free to choose what to emphasize. In addition, the previous AP U.S. History course featured a strong insistence on content, i.e., on the students' acquisition of extensive factual knowledge of American history.

But with the new 2014 framework, the College Board has put forward a lengthy 134-page document which repudiates that earlier approach, centralizes control,

deemphasizes content, and promotes a particular interpretation of American history. This interpretation downplays American citizenship and American world leadership in favor of a more global and transnational perspective. The College Board has long enjoyed an effective monopoly on advanced placement testing. The changes made in the new framework expose the danger in such a monopoly. The result smacks of an “official” account of the American past. Local, state, and federal policymakers may need to explore competitive alternatives to the College Board’s current domination of advanced-placement testing.

The new framework is organized around such abstractions as “identity,” “peopling,” “work, exchange, and technology,” and “human geography” while downplaying essential subjects, such as the sources, meaning, and development of America’s ideals and political institutions, notably the Constitution. Elections, wars, diplomacy, inventions, discoveries—all these formerly central subjects tend to dissolve into the vagaries of identity-group conflict. The new framework scrubs away all traces of what used to be the chief glory of historical writing—vivid and compelling narrative—and reduces history to an bloodless interplay of abstract and impersonal forces. Gone is the idea that history should provide a fund of compelling stories about exemplary people and events. No longer will students hear about America as a dynamic and exemplary nation, flawed in many respects, but whose citizens have striven through the years toward the more perfect realization of its professed ideals. The new version of the test will effectively marginalize important ways of teaching about the American past, and force American high schools to teach U.S. history from a perspective that self-consciously seeks to de-center American history and subordinate it to a global and heavily social-scientific perspective.

There are notable political or ideological biases inherent in the 2014 framework, and certain structural innovations that will inevitably result in imbalance in the test, and bias in the course. Chief among these is the treatment of American national identity. The 2010 framework treated national identity, including “views of the American national character and ideas about American exceptionalism” as a central theme. But the 2014 framework makes a dramatic shift away from that emphasis, choosing instead to grant far more extensive attention to “how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial and ethnic identities.” The new framework makes a shift from “identity” to “identities.” Indeed, the new framework is so populated with examples of American history as the conflict between social groups, and so inattentive to the sources of national unity and cohesion, that it is hard to see how

students will gain any coherent idea of what those sources might be. This does them, and us, an immense disservice.

We believe that the study of history should expose our young students to vigorous debates about the nature of American exceptionalism, American identity, and America's role in the world. Such debates are the warp and woof of historical understanding. We do not seek to reduce the education of our young to the inculcation of fairy tales, or of a simple, whitewashed, heroic, even hagiographical nationalist narrative. Instead, we support a course that fosters informed and reflective civic awareness, while providing a vivid sense of the grandeur and drama of its subject.

A formal education in American history serves young people best by equipping them for a life of deep and consequential membership in their own society. The College Board's 2014 framework sadly neglects this essential civic purpose of education in history. We can, and must, do better.

- *Scholars Concerned About Advanced Placement History*

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