

Failing History: Colleges Neglect Core U.S. Principles

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - January 15, 2013



The trench warfare between President Obama’s Democratic Party and the House-led Republicans over the budget, entitlements, and regulation reflects a profound and historic difference of opinion over the size and scope of the federal government.

Accurately understanding what’s at stake in this struggle requires knowledge of American history. But that’s exactly the kind of subject liberal education is denying today’s college students.

Because the people are the ultimate source of legitimate power in a liberal democracy, the United States has an interest in a citizenry well-acquainted with the principles on which our political order is based; the nature and development of our economic system; the role of diplomacy and military affairs in securing American liberties; the impact on our manners and mores of religious belief; and the quest for equal treatment of minorities, women, and the poor.

Unfortunately, according to a new report by the National Association of Scholars (NAS), “Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?,” our colleges and universities are doing a bad job. More precisely, as the NAS report documents,

history departments promote a drastically incomplete and distorted vision of America by concentrating on the teaching of race, class, and gender at the expense of nearly everything else.

Since universities generally avoid transparency and accountability, it is notoriously difficult to determine what exactly is taught in their classrooms.

Texas, however, is different: It mandates that undergraduates at public universities take two courses in American history. The state also requires that public universities make easily available faculty members' backgrounds, research interests, course assignments, and course syllabi. As a result, NAS was able to determine with precision for the fall semester of 2010 the content of lower division American history classes that satisfy the state's requirement at the University of Texas and Texas A&M, the state's two largest public universities.

The report's central findings confirm long-standing suspicions that university education fails to provide students with a well-rounded acquaintance with the fundamentals. At the University of Texas, 78 percent of the course sections through which students could fulfill the American history requirement devoted half or more of their readings to issues of race, class and gender; at Texas A&M, 50 percent of the courses did the same.

In Austin, 78 percent of faculty teaching the required courses in American history had research interests in the sub-specialties of race, class, and gender. Even in the more traditional milieu of College Station, known for its corps of cadets, nearly two-thirds of the relevant faculty members shared these identity politics niches.

Younger faculty were significantly more likely to have research interests in race, class, and gender: 83 percent of UT faculty members teaching the required courses who received their PhDs in the 1990s or later had research interests in race, class and gender; at A&M, the percentage was even higher -- nine out of 10.

Furthermore, "special topics" courses were heavily skewed toward the study of race, class and gender. And many key documents of American history were rarely assigned. Indeed, in 2010 not one qualifying course for the history requirement at the University of Texas or Texas A&M asked students to read the Mayflower Compact or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

There is no reason to suppose that public university history departments in red-state Texas are anomalous in their progressive preoccupation with race, class, and gender. The NAS report notes that studies conducted by Brooklyn College history professor KC Johnson found similar results at Bowdoin College in Maine, the University of Michigan, and UCLA.

In short, students at the two Texas colleges -- and very likely elsewhere in that state's system and throughout the country -- are enrolling in American history classes that "focus on content that makes it impossible to grasp the larger political conflicts, institutional frameworks, and philosophic ideals that have governed the course of American history."

The NAS report concludes with a list of moderate and common-sensical recommendations designed to depoliticize the study of history. If these reforms depend on professors' and administrators' initiative and diligence, they have virtually no chance of being adopted.

Yes, history departments should monitor curricula to ensure that course offerings are comprehensive and reflect a diversity of perspectives, and they should hire, promote, and tenure faculty with broader interests. They should also offer more genuine survey courses; create lists of essential primary documents and scholarly works; and diversify graduate programs. Yes, deans and provosts should commission external reviews to ensure that departments take these salutary steps. And yes, publishers should be encouraged to produce textbooks that are neither progressive nor conservative but comprehensive, fairly presenting both progressive and conservative interpretations of American history.

But decades of decline, deception, and denial in the humanities and social sciences strongly suggest that professors and university administrators will regard such reforms as contrary to their narrow scholarly interests and in conflict with their vision of education as the transmission of progressive values.

Consequently, those to whom professors and administrators are accountable or on whom they depend must drive reform. At public universities, state legislators are the ultimate source of authority as well as important funders. At private colleges and universities, alumni provide a critical portion of the funding and often occupy positions of influence as trustees and board members.

For the most part, neither state legislators nor private college alumni are professional educators. But in a liberal democracy, when thought is freer and minds are more critical outside universities than inside, it is incumbent on non-professionals to come to the defense of liberal education.

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