

College Board's Reckless Spin on U.S. History

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Fifty-five distinguished scholars published an open letter this morning protesting the one-sided and politicized curriculum framework introduced last year by the College Board to prepare high school students for the Advanced Placement Exam in U.S. history. The scholars assert that the College Board's framework exposes the teaching of American history to "a grave new risk." It does this and worse.

By obscuring this nation's founding principles and promise, the College Board's U.S. history guidelines will erode the next generation's disposition to preserve what is best in the American political tradition. It will also weaken students' ability to improve our laws and political institutions in light of America's constitutional commitment to limited government, individual liberty, and equality under law.

The College Board is a powerful not-for-profit organization that writes, administers, and grades not only AP exams in more than 30 fields but also the Scholastic Aptitude Tests. Its laudable goal is to help students prepare for college by promoting "excellence and equity in education."

Advanced Placement high school courses provide "the equivalent of a two-semester introductory college or university U.S. history course." To assist high school teachers in the design of these courses, the College Board framework claims to present "thematic learning objectives" that "are written in a way that does not promote any particular political position or interpretation of history." This is far from the truth.

A big part of the problem stems from the College Board's intention to facilitate the construction of courses that "align with college-level standards." Created by professors and high school teachers, the College Board's U.S. history curriculum framework not only embodies ideas and issues associated with college-level study but also the intellectual prejudices and partisan preferences that increasingly deform university history teaching.

Earlier this year Gordon Wood, a preeminent scholar of the American founding, took to the pages of *The Weekly Standard*—a noteworthy choice since so many of Wood's non-academic essays have appeared in *The New Republic* and *The New York Review of Books*—to explain the decline of his discipline. His recent essay lamented that the rise of identity politics has all but blotted out traditional scholarship. "The inequalities of race and gender," he wrote, "now permeate much of academic history-writing, so much so that the general reading public that

wants to learn about the whole of our nation's past has had to turn to history books written by non-academics who have no PhDs and are not involved in the incestuous conversations of the academic scholars.”

The College Board, however, takes its cue from the professors immersed in those incestuous conversations. Although it declares that its U.S. history program aims to teach students “to use historical facts and evidence to achieve deeper conceptual understandings of major developments in U.S. history,” the College Board’s framework highlights developments that correspond closely to progressive priorities and reflect politically correct dogmas.

The framework focuses on social history, which embraces the experience of ordinary people and minorities, while relegating the traditional topics of narrative history—constitutional principles and the unending debate about their reach and application, as well as diplomacy, military strategy, and statesmanship—to bit parts in the story of America.

In addition, the framework emphasizes European conquest of native peoples, economic exploitation, and environmental abuse. It subordinates the formation of American national self-awareness and sovereignty to global forces and multicultural perspectives. It stresses the distinct group identities that have developed within the United States but gives little space to American citizenship. It showcases the rise of early 20th century progressivism, the mid-20th century New Deal, and 1960s liberalism as bold responses to real world challenges but presents post-World War II conservatism as grounded in fear and belligerency. And it dwells on America’s sins, real and imagined, while soft-pedaling America’s remarkable achievements in lifting people from poverty, assimilating immigrants from all over the world, and securing liberty at home and abroad.

The professors opposing the College Board framework stress that they do not seek to replace its progressive and politically correct curriculum with a conservative and adulatory one. They disavow any interest in suppressing the dark side of American history. Rather, in the spirit of a liberal education suited to a free people, they call for a curriculum that presents “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.”

In response to critics, Trevor Packer, head of the College Board’s AP programs, stated in April in a letter published in the Wall Street Journal that this summer his organization will “release a new edition of the course framework which will clarify and encourage a balanced approach to the teaching of American history.”

Don’t expect more than cosmetic changes. But even if the College Board meets critics more than half way, its effectual monopoly still ought to be broken because the nation’s schools should not be compelled to submit to a single approved account of U.S. history.

In pursuit of genuine reform, a good next step would be the creation of a company to compete with the College Board as a testing and accrediting agency. This would give school districts across the country a choice about how to prepare their high school students for college-level study of American history.

Such an approach to curing the defects of the contemporary curriculum flows directly from the instructive arc of U.S. history, which bends toward freedom.

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