

AP Course Standards Have Fallen Prey to Partisanship

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Labor Day weekend marks the return to school and the beginning of the home stretch of the presidential campaign. The connection is typically overlooked.

The next president will confront momentous decisions about America's role in the world. Since the dilemmas of the present grow out of the past, voters who know their history will be in a better position to cast responsible ballots in November and to hold the 45th president accountable throughout his or her term.

Consider European history. If you are unaware of the rise, restraint, and resurgence of European nationalism, how will you understand the motives driving British voters' decision to leave the European Union, let alone the implications for the EU's future and for world politics?

If you are ignorant of the millennial struggle between Islam and Christianity, uninformed about the European political failures—and ideas about freedom, democracy, and national self-determination developed in Europe—that propelled Zionism, and unaware of the European colonization of the Middle East and its 20th century unraveling, how will you evaluate the fault lines that mark America's relations to allies and adversaries in the region?

If you lack knowledge of Russia's longstanding imperial aspirations, the horrors of Soviet communism, and the West's American-led triumph in the Cold War, how will you effectively assess Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula, its invasion of eastern Ukraine, and its threat to Europe's eastern flank and the international order?

Because an understanding of European history enhances American citizens' discharge of their civic responsibilities, the content and quality of history courses in American schools is a matter of public interest. The public has good reason to be concerned.

The reason is that through its popular, nationwide Advanced Placement programs, which “enable students to pursue college-level studies in high school and through end-of-the-year exams obtain college credit,” the College Board is imposing a leftist European history curriculum.

A powerful not-for-profit organization, the College Board has acquired a monopoly of sorts in higher education. It also creates and administers several ubiquitous tests: the SAT, the LSAT, the MCAT, the GMAT, and the GRE, among others. These exams play a major role in

determining admissions to college, graduate schools, and professional schools.

In the fall of 2015, the College Board published updated standards and guidelines for high school teachers offering courses that prepare students to take the Advanced Placement European History (APEH) exam. While the document—some 200 pages—advances in several respects the interests of liberal education, it is severely flawed.

Although the APEH framework “unequivocally supports the principle that each school implements its own curriculum that will enable students to” acquire the APEH-specified knowledge and skills, features an array of broad themes and organizing concepts, and provides “instructional approaches” that require the examination of issues from different angles and through the lens of diverse disciplines, the College Board’s commitment to a truly liberal education—one that equips students to think for themselves by imparting facts, highlighting controversies, and refining students’ ability to grasp opposing views—is half-hearted.

This is the conclusion of a recent report, “The Disappearing Continent: A Critique of the Revised AP European History Exam,” for the National Association of Scholars (on whose board I serve), an organization devoted to restoring liberal education and the intellectual freedom, reasoned scholarship, and civil debate on which it depends. According to the NAS report, the new APEH framework—through the arc of its preferred narrative, its omissions, and its distortions—conscripts the curriculum for partisan ends.

The report’s author, NAS Director of Communications David Randall, argues that the College Board presents European history as the overcoming of colonialism and imperialism and the spreading of modernization and secularization, which culminate in the 21st century redistributionist welfare state. No history of Europe would be complete without exploring these topics. No history of Europe, however, can be adequate that presents, as does the College Board’s, the progressive narrative as the only respectable interpretation.

The APEH standards and guidelines do stress the importance of viewing European history from multiple perspectives. But the overarching aim is to illuminate the fine points and obscure corners of the preferred progressive interpretation, not to clarify its strengths and weaknesses as a complete account of the inner logic of European history, nor to invite consideration of alternative grand narratives of European ideas, institutions, and achievements.

The APEH framework’s 12-page topic index underscores the College Board’s one-sidedness. The index does not contain a main entry for “democracy” but it does for “absolutism,” “dictatorship,” and “fascism.” It lacks main entries for “freedom” and “liberty” but includes ones for “hereditary privileges,” “prostitution,” and “witchcraft.” Under “warfare,” the index lists three sub-items. Each is followed by a single page reference; two of the three deal with

nonmilitary matters (“commercial rivalries influencing” and “suffering brought on by”). In contrast, the index lists under “feminism” nine sub-items, four of which are followed by multiple page references.

What must be done to achieve a better balance and bring the APEH framework more in line with the imperatives of liberal education?

NAS recommends that the College Board incorporate background in classical and medieval European history so that students will appreciate modern Europe’s breaks from *and* continuities with its past. It also argues for drawing out connections between European history and the ideas and institutions out of which the United States arose. It advises reducing the Marxist-tinged emphasis on inevitable social and economic change and restoring appreciation of contingency, culture, politics, and individual choice and conduct. And it advocates enriching the study of religion (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism)—owing to its centrality to European history—as well as that of political liberty and economic liberty which are nothing less than defining features of Western civilization.

The College Board is unlikely to implement such reforms, however. As its 2015 updated framework explains: “Each AP course is modeled upon a comparable college course, and college and university faculty play a vital role in ensuring that AP courses align with college-level standards.”

In other words, since the aim of AP courses is to prepare high school students for college, and since the faculty who design and teach college history courses have long since apotheosized social history, demoted the history of liberty, downplayed or disparaged religion, occluded the deep roots of nationalism, and written the conduct of diplomacy and the waging of war out of history, calls to revise the standards are likely to fall on deaf ears.

Accordingly, NAS urges Americans—concerned parents, educators, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists—to create “one or more competitive alternatives to the College Board’s AP testing program.” The history of liberty in Europe and the United States—which the College Board systematically obscures—suggests that “America’s schools and America’s students will take the best tests and learn the best history only when America’s advanced college-placement testing market opens up to competition.”

By impelling schools to form citizens better able to select responsibly their public officials and hold them democratically accountable, competition in education advances the public interest.

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