

The new high school Advanced Placement History Exam is not revisionist, despite the accusations of some conservative groups.

*This year, half a million high school students will enroll in Advanced Placement History classes, in order to gain college credit and scholarships. This year's redesigned curriculum has come under fire from largely conservative activist groups and school boards, for what they claim is a 'revisionist' history of the U.S. **Daniel Faris** argues that such criticisms are misplaced, and that the new curriculum is designed to provide a deeper understanding of the "why" of American history by providing both facts and critical analysis.*



High school is an important time for students; they find themselves on the cusp of adulthood, making decisions that will shape the people they will eventually become. For most, it's also a time of relentless studying and jockeying for the best scholarships, which usually means taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes. This coming school year, about half a million American high school students will enroll in AP History – a class meant to exercise critical thinking skills rather than their gift for memorization.

More "traditional" history courses tend to place the emphasis on lectures and the retention of facts. This year, however, the AP History curriculum has been redesigned to focus instead on getting students to think critically about America's past. Highlights include racism as an institutional ideology of the earliest American colonists, followed by discussions about how this informed our modern national identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the tone of the curriculum has sparked a lively debate in certain sectors of America's intellectual community. The College Board, the not-for-profit entity that's responsible for setting the AP curriculums, has drawn fire from activist groups, academic organizations, and even school boards. They have several grievances, and most of them center on the idea that the new course material is biased or politically motivated. Some have gone so far as to call it a "revisionist" history of the U.S.

There's no question that this is challenging material – but how worthy it is of becoming a full-blown controversy is a question that's perhaps best answered with a look at how effective the previous curriculum has been. Both educators and students alike have found previous incarnations of the AP History curriculum wanting. In an [open letter](#) from the College Board it was made clear that AP History classes have heretofore failed to provide "opportunities to understand the 'why' of U.S. history, and to make its deeper meanings come alive to students."

This is a scathing, but admirably unselfconscious, indictment of the current state of education in the U.S., which is frequently known for its tendency to "[teach to the test](#)" – a teaching method that stands in stark opposition to resources from [Berkeley](#) (and, probably, from almost everywhere else) that drive home the point that the most effective teachers are the ones who engage with students and who know how to create interactions and meaningful dialogues. The new AP History curriculum has been designed to do just that.



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If you wanted a practical, present-day example of a way in which knowledge of historical precedent could be beneficial, let's take a look backward to the aftermath of Vietnam. Many of the challenges faced by returning veterans [continue even now](#), some 40 years later. It seems American troops are always returning from deployment in one country or another, and with only a few exceptions, we seem not to have learned much from these experiences. President Obama [made more promises](#) recently to veterans and many colleges offer [scholarships and benefits](#) for servicemen and women, but if we're perfectly honest with ourselves, this is an issue where we've been, if history is any indication, sorely lacking. In other words, a greater awareness not only of our shared accountability, but also of our place in history, could help us make significant progress in this area. If examples such as these show that context is everything in life, then the College Board is looking to ensure that students get it with the new AP curriculum.

In their 2014 Annual [AP Report to the Nation](#), the College Board revealed that the AP program has been gaining significant ground over the last 10 years. In 2003, the number of total AP examinees was over 514,000. By 2013, it had nearly doubled. Interestingly, the number of low-income examinees grew from just shy of 60,000 to more than 275,000 in the same 10 year period, underscoring the importance of the program for gifted, lower-income students who nevertheless want to make an impression with potential colleges.

That's all great news for the College Board. But how are these AP students performing? According to the same report, of the total AP English, History, and Social Science exams taken in 2003, just 59 percent of students scored higher than a 3 (the test is scored out of 5). In 2013, that number dropped only three percentage points to 56 percent. Not bad, considering the total number of examinees more than doubled. However, it's also a point of data that underscores the need to continually improve a thing – particularly something as essential as education – even if that thing is already working “well enough.”

So what kind of impact will the new curriculum have on these many students? And how seriously should this controversy be taken? There's little question that a great deal of America's history is both challenging and controversial. The near-genocide of the Native Americans happened. Slavery happened. Japanese internment happened. Racism and jingoism are in America's blood. Regrettably, the most outspoken critics of the AP History curriculum seem content to pretend that none of it happened.

Among them is Peter Wood, who represents the National Association of Scholars – a right-wing organization – and who already has something of a reputation for [championing ignorance](#). He has called the new curriculum a “briefing document on progressive and leftist views of the American past.” Peter Wood is not alone. A Christian group called Concerned Women for America has also taken offense to the new curriculum, and has been

encouraging its devotees to write letters of complaint to the College Board.

Perhaps the most scathing criticism comes from the Republican National Committee. They've used the words "radical" and "inaccurate" to describe this version of American history. They claim it's rife with "political bias." In an [interview](#) with *Vice*, Ken Mercer, a member of the Texas School Board said that he wants to delay the launch of the curriculum indefinitely until such time as the "negative stuff" is balanced out.

When asked what he learned in his own high school history classes, Mercer admits that he's forgotten most of it – except for what he calls all the "great American battles." He says that learning about these conflicts was instrumental in the development of his patriotic spirit. The mistake Mercer makes, then, is exaggerating the importance of America's military might throughout her history. Is there not more to patriotism than winning wars?

The answer is "yes," and were this not the case, all we'd teach our children about the Revolutionary War, for example, would be that Britain was handed a stunning defeat by a band of farmers. The scrappy underdog triumphs. What we'd be missing out on is any nuance, any indication that what they were fighting for wasn't about empty demonstrations of strength or patriotism. The war was *complicated* in a way that no subsequent war has been – despite our relentless insistence that our modern-day troops are dying for our freedoms. Yes, those ill-equipped farmers were fighting for freedom, but it was with heavy hearts. Nobody wanted to fight that war. Nobody wanted all those children to grow up without fathers.

But we did it. And our success in that war helped to shape our cultural identity, and ultimately the world's as well. This is the "why" of U.S. history" that the College Board spoke of in that open letter.

The new AP History curriculum wasn't designed by political radicals, terrorists, or dissenters; it was designed by impartial American historians who, in that same [open letter](#), underscored the importance of both factual knowledge *and* critical analysis – that much-needed fuel that healthy classroom dialogues thrive on.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Daniel Faris

[Daniel Faris](#) is a freelance journalist and a graduate of the Writers Institute at Susquehanna University. When he's not blogging about politics on [Only Slightly Biased](#), you can find his alter ego discussing progressive music at [New Music Friday](#). He currently lives in Philadelphia.

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