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Friday April 5, 2013

# American history bill aims for a more inclusive curriculum



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By Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.  
Texas Public Policy Foundation

National studies reveal that American universities falter at civic education, having forgotten Jefferson’s warning that any country expecting to be both “ignorant and free” expects “what never was and never will be.” Happily, Texas, since 1955, has required collegiate courses in American history. Unhappily, this requirement is not always followed. To correct this through clarifying the 1955 law’s intentions, the American History bill (HB 1938, SB 1128) has been filed in both houses. This clarification simultaneously addresses the past underrepresentation of the contributions of Mexican-, African- and Native Americans, as well as women, in history courses. Had the 1955 law’s vision of broad, inclusive survey courses been followed, this breach would not have occurred. The bill’s clarification ensures that underrepresentation in American history will not happen again.

Introduced by Sen. Dan Patrick and Rep. Giovanni Capriglione, the bill combats the alarming results of national studies documenting civic literacy. An Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) study finds Texas undergraduates fail at civics. Nationwide, 50 universities were surveyed, three from Texas—Baylor, West Texas A&M, and UT-Austin. Students at these institutions performed worse than many of their peers nationwide. The problem is not Texas’ alone. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) surveyed students from the nation’s 55 best colleges and universities. It found that 81 percent of college seniors received “a grade of D or F on test questions drawn from a basic high school history curriculum.”

To its credit, the Texas legislature anticipated this crisis. Its 1955 law requires all public college and university students to fulfill six credits of American history. This requirement was entered into the Education Code in 1971. But the disturbing civic-learning results show that we need to do more, beginning with clarifying the intention of the 1955 law.

The 1955 law’s purpose is to guarantee that college students—most of whom are not History majors—receive a broad encounter with American history from a diversity of perspectives, among them, political, intellectual, economic, military, scientific, and social history. The law intends that American history be part of a common core for all to enhance students’ civic knowledge and citizenship skills.

Given the legislation’s clear purpose, comprehensive survey classes in American History are required. Unfortunately, there have arisen courses offered by some universities that are used to fulfill the six-credit requirement without fulfilling the diversity and inclusiveness it mandates. Some schools allow narrow, exclusive courses—a number of which are not even in American history—to satisfy the law; for example, Naval History is allowed to satisfy the requirement, as are classes that so focus on social history that they crowd out the other, equally valuable facets of American history.

Such courses insufficiently follow not only the law but also the requirements of sound teaching. Narrow “Special Topics” courses, by definition, focus only on limited aspects of American history, thereby giving short shrift to other vital elements. These courses, clearly valuable for other purposes, rightly belong in the overall curriculum. Just as clearly, they do not adequately enhance the broad understanding of American history that the law requires. As such, they do not help and may impair efforts to combat the civic illiteracy documented in the ISI and ACTA studies.



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The bill clarifies the 1955 law by mandating that only general survey courses fulfill the requirement. Beyond that, the bill, leery of micromanagement, leaves it to universities themselves to ensure that their courses satisfy the law, confident that universities are eager to see that the law, once clarified, is followed.

Finally, because the bill merely elucidates preexisting law, opposition to it logically requires opposition to the 1955 law itself. Of course, anyone opposed to the 58-year-old law is free to seek its repeal. That is how our democracy works. But so long as the law is on the books, it is legislators' duty to enforce their own creation. That, too, is how our democracy works. Through strengthening Texas students' civic education, the American History bill hopes to help guarantee that our democracy continues to work.

Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He recently published (with Gary Glenn) the American government textbook, Investigating American Democracy (Oxford).

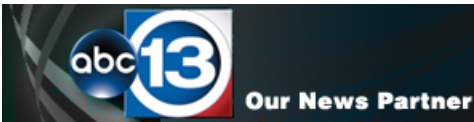
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