

Dear AP Curriculum Writer,

I really enjoyed taking AP World History junior year. I think it was my favorite class of the entire AP suite, because it spanned the entirety of our human experience from prehistory to the present. Taking World History drastically changed how I viewed the world, and given the thousands of students you educate each year as one of the biggest education organizations in the United States, you have the power to drastically impact the perspectives of an entire generation. That's why I'm writing you to tell you why I'm so upset with how your AP curriculum changed the curriculum to only include the years after 1450.

I can understand why you might want to make these changes to the curriculum. It seems like that you wanted to allow teachers to be able to actually finish the curriculum; there might have been some problems with getting students through one very long and expansive curriculum (and therefore keeping students from being properly prepared for the AP test.) I think this is a valid concern - even my briskly-paced, one-chapter-a-week history teacher struggled to teach us everything, and I can easily see how this would be a welcome relief to stressed teachers and overwhelmed students. But I think is part of the rigor of the AP Program - students should be expected to learn lots of information relatively quickly, especially if the AP class is marketed as the equivalent to a college class. But if you don't buy this argument, there are many institutional steps that your organization could do to offset this crunch, like giving teachers a sample timeline to help them organize their lesson planning more efficiently. You could also curve the exam less strictly in to make it less necessary that students know absolutely all of the material, easing some of the pressures on teachers to teach everything (given that only seven percent of students got fives on this exam in 2019, comparable to some of the notoriously difficult classes like AP Bio, it seems like you have plenty of room to give students leeway on this.) Given that you have plenty of alternatives, I don't think that the paradoxical step of putting less history in a history class is the most effective approach.

I think we differ in what a history education is really for. You've stated one reason for your curriculum change is because the current structure doesn't allow students to go in-depth about different periods in history, implying that you believe having more information about a smaller part of history is more important than knowing general trends about it. Under your new curriculum, some countries will certainly be emphasized more in class, promoting harmful ideas of which countries are more important than others. Prioritizing a curriculum that teaches a broader array of topics, as your previous one did, minimizes this effect because it encourages a more equitable distribution of time and attention, and therefore prevents you from using your authority as a prominent academic organization to sway student perceptions of the world. I would also add that much of this depth is unnecessary at the high school level. For students who are interested in studying history later on, the point of high school survey classes is to cover as much material as possible so they can find things that may pique their interests in college. For students who aren't interested in taking another history class, it's not likely these students are ever going to encounter this material ever again, so this is the school's one shot at educating them about the history of the world.

Although I am understanding of this curriculum change, there's one specific reason why I am against the changes you've decided to make to this curriculum: the erasure of much of the neglected histories of early non-European countries. I'm sure you've heard the TED talk by the writer Chimamanda Adichie warning about the "single story," where she explains the harms about reducing our view of someone else to just one narrative. For example, there's a particular part in which Adichie talks about her experiences coming to America, where she was greeted by her roommate who was surprised that her life in Africa wasn't rife with poverty and conflicts. I think it's pretty common for other high school students to see Africa similarly to Adichie's roommate - I can say I did before I took AP World History. They develop this from the strife they see in the news, the war they see on television, and yes, the information taught to them in lessons at school; the things that are deemed "most important" for them to know about Africa are consistently negative. I can tell you that my perspectives on Africa were largely based on the AP Comparative Government class I took, which detailed each coup Nigeria experienced in its sixty years of existence, and the news articles I read, even on reputable news outlets, that predominately detailed the persistent political and economic challenges facing the continent.

These challenges facing Africa are real ones, to be sure. But only expounding on these challenges completely ignores the rich cultural heritage found across Africa and the history that developed it. To complete this narrative would require a student to go out of his or her way to find more aspects about African society and history, which very few have the time or the inclination to do. (And while I've used the example of Africa here because my view of the country was most transformed by this class, the same could be said about almost every non-European civilization your curriculum used to cover.)

Your curriculum used to be a solution to this exceedingly narrow view of Africa that I held. You taught about Mansa Musa, believed to be the richest man in the world. You taught about the salt and gold mines that brought wealth to the Kingdom of Ghana. You taught about the civilizations in Timbuktu. You taught about the Swahili traders. By reaching back past 1450 to teach the complete history of the world, you ensured that I received information that showed the power and wealth that African civilizations once had, extending past my limited "single story" of Africa nations. I now am able to look at Africa through a more discerning eye, seeing it as a place that has the potential to restore the richness and influence of its past. But now that you've effectively chopped the majority of human history out of your World History curriculum, you make it so that students like me will never be taught this information and therefore never learn the more complete view of places like Africa that they are unfamiliar with.

I believe that this change to the curriculum is especially pernicious given the time period in which it begins - 1450. Around this time period, two major changes were happening in Europe: the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration. By beginning during the Renaissance, you introduce Europe during its peak, while ignoring the thousand-year time span in which Europe was ravished by warfare and failed to produce as many intellectual milestones than during the Renaissance. This, in fact, reinforces the single story that Europe has always been the most technologically, academically, and politically complex society in the world, when in fact it was outshaded by the Islamic Empires and China throughout much of the pre-1450 time period. This is further compounded by the fact that 1450 coincides with the beginning of the Age of Exploration, when European powers began to colonize parts of Africa, Asia, and Americas. The issue at hand not so much the reduced coverage of Africa in later time periods, but the context in

which Africa appears in them. Post 1450-events consistently puts these colonized territories in a subservient position relative to European societies, like as through colonization and slavery, making them seem less powerful in comparison and reinforcing the narrative of a powerful Europe triumphing over “uncivilized” lands. This also takes away a pre-colonial point of reference to what African society could have been if colonization hadn’t happened, since the political structures that were introduced during the colonial period are considered to be a major contributor to the political strife and economic instability African countries experience.

Looking at the bigger picture, this maintenance of one single story of non-European cultures curriculum hinders the accomplishment of two goals of a strong history education: giving an accurate interpretation of the past and helping students understand cultures that are not their own. The dualities that I explained above mean that under your curriculum, students will come away with a skewed and incorrect interpretation of world history. And since they most likely be unchallenged in their original narrow viewpoints by other institutions, like the media, they will operate under this faulty knowledge for life. And because students will not be encouraged to consider non-Europeans civilizations under a different light, they cannot possibly have a better understanding of their cultures. What good is a curriculum change if it means that students come out of the classroom worse off than if you had left it alone? You, as one of the most powerful institutions in American high school education, have the mandate to create the next generation of informed, forward-thinking citizens. Don’t let us down now.

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