

June 18, 2018

Dear Mr. Packer,

I am a veteran social studies teacher at Anoka High School in Minnesota. I have taught AP History, first European and now World, for half of my twenty eight years in the classroom. I'm writing to express my opposition to the recently announced changes to the scope of the AP World History exam. I attended your open forum at the Reading in Salt Lake City. I appreciate that elaborated on the rationale for the change and took questions there.

I understand some of the rationale for this change. In fact, low scores on some free-response questions and the breadth of the course both concerned me when my district switched from AP European History to AP World History as the accelerated option for eleventh grade. These concerns have completely dissipated over four years of teaching this wonderful class.

Teaching essay writing to AP World History students has produced similar results, struggles, and growth compared to the same process with the same type of students in my AP European History classes. Similarly, the large time frame of AP World History has not actually involved more content compared to AP Euro. Years covered do not equate to content load. This is implicit in the official Course Description which allots forty percent of the content to more than ninety percent of years. Moreover, the 10,000 years of AP World History contain fewer Key Concepts than the slightly more than 500 years of AP United States History. The granularity of World History is different than the other histories. Teachers overwhelmed by content need resources and training to help them to understand this and to encourage them to focus their teaching on the Key Concepts. If the content is to be trimmed, it should be in the details attached to the Key Concepts.

While I agree with your comments at the forum that a 1450 to the present course need not be Eurocentric, critical content would be lost. The large stretches of class time covering achievements in the non-European world before 1450 speak more loudly to students than any lesson, lecture, or interpretive framing. At the end the class all students realize that the economic, intellectual, and political centers of the World changed during history. As others have remarked this is especially important for students of color who too rarely themselves in curricula. I would add that seeing the broad spectrum of humanity is important in different ways for white students who need to know that people who look like them have not always been on top.

Such curricular inclusivity is especially important in our current political environment. When the President referred to the home countries of some of my students' families as "shithole[s]" this year and I decided to address this with my class, I was very glad that we had spent time talking about West African trading empires and pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations. Similarly when the President lambasted some of my students and their families as a "disaster" for Minnesota in the days before the 2016 election, I was glad that we had discussed the vibrant Swahili society, including Mogadishu. Time spent outside of these specific areas also felt important in these moments, because it had communicated to all students that all people are valuable in their own right. The stretches of time focusing on achievements of a wide variety of people and places builds credibility when I need to reassure my students that the dignity of all people must be respected.

The educational context for this change is also important. As I'm sure you know, the social studies in general have been losing ground in primary education for two decades as testing of math and read has intensified. Here in Minnesota, for instance, ancient World History was once a full course in the sixth grade and is now a part of third grade social studies. I would welcome the state of Minnesota or my school district creating curricular space for two years of high school social studies, but that is very unlikely. Students rarely learn about Africa, Asia, and Oceania outside of World History. A recent Anoka High School graduate and AP World History student commented that she valued the class, but "honestly I still don't know nearly enough of non Eurocentric history." This student is white, but thinks that her education has overwhelmingly presented her with historical subjects who look or were reacting to people who looked like her. Another student, who immigrated as a small child and identifies as Somali, commented that APWH was the first "class in which [her] worldview was not only validated but addressed." Reducing the coverage of periods one through three will make the situations described by these students even worse.

Like you, I trust the Test Development Committee to create a global AP Exam for World History for any chronological scope. But, limiting the scope of the course to the time after 1450 means that more students who take courses that are straight Western Civilization will perform well on the test. Their teachers will be vindicated in their decisions not to adjust their courses to a more global model. AP World History will lose much of its power to interrupt institutionalized racism.

Finally, one point that you made in Salt Lake City seemed undeniably false. This change will involve a lot of uncompensated labor for APWH teachers. The labor will take the form of day to day lesson planning, not content mastery. More deeply exploring periods four through six while developing disciplinary skills will require additional activities and formative assessments. I'm sure that this affects teachers' reactions to the announced changes. Not recognizing this diminishes your credibility with teachers.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I'm sure that you have received more than twelve emails on this subject. I urge you to consider including much more early history in your revision to the recently announced changes to the AP World History curriculum. I am writing this in my personal capacity, but I will be sharing my thoughts with colleagues.

Very sincerely yours,

Eric Beckman