

Pop Quiz! True or False?

Only 18% of *college graduates* could identify James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution”—on a multiple-choice question.

Fifty-one percent did not know the term lengths of U.S. Senators and Representatives.

Just 12% could identify the 13th Amendment as the government action that free the slaves.

Regrettably, all these statements are true, according to a 2019 National Opinion Survey conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA).

ACTA has promoted curricular reform in higher education for 26 years, and we are particularly concerned about civic education. When it comes to our students’ grasp of American history, civics, and government, clearly something is seriously amiss.

We are not alone in recognizing this; a cursory glance across the body politic and into every corner of the culture indicates the rapid coarsening of public dialogue and deepening of political divisions. America is experiencing a profound crisis in civic literacy and with it, the disappearance of reasoned political debate.

ACTA traces this worrying trend, in large part, to the lack of a shared, fact-based context rooted in our history. We have focused our resources toward building a better understanding of whether and how U.S. colleges and universities are teaching American history—the short answer, unfortunately, is not so much and not very well.

Each year, we release *What Will They Learn?*, an assessment of the core curricula at over 1,100 colleges and universities. Today, only 18% of schools require all students to complete a foundational course in U.S. history or government. ACTA recently released the second edition of *No U.S. History? How College History Departments Leave the United States out of the Major*, which builds on the *What Will They Learn?* report by taking an in-depth look at requirements within the history major going back to 1952. Seventy years ago, the vast majority of schools required history majors to complete at least one broad or foundational course in U.S. history. Very few do so today.

Snapshot of the Second Edition of *No U.S. History?*

No U.S. History? provides a detailed overview of the history major at 73 top universities, tracing the disappearance of an American history requirement from both the major and the general education program.

Only **one of the nation’s top 25 national universities**, the University of California–Berkeley, requires all history majors to complete a wide-ranging course in U.S. history.

Only **four of the top 25 public universities** require history majors to complete a wide-ranging course in U.S. history.

Only **three of the top 25 liberal arts colleges** require history majors to complete a wide-ranging course in U.S. history.

The number of history majors has dropped by over 30% since the Great Recession; no other major has seen such a steep decline.

And even within the discipline, there is a growing divide and a change in ethos. Should the goal be to teach in an objective, fact-based, and balanced way? Or should the goal be to craft a narrative that advances social justice, by reframing history to serve a political aim? Social history has all but replaced political, military,

diplomatic, legal, and intellectual history. At Harvard University, for example, only four of 36 full-time faculty members specialize in American history from a vantage that is not social in nature.

All of which is a real departure from the traditional history major, which sought to provide depth and breadth of knowledge—a balanced education without agenda, grounded in fact.

The *New York Times*' 1619 Project became a lightning rod for this academic divide, seeking to displace 1776 and 1787 with the date of the establishment of slavery as the nation's true Founding moment. The original version even asserted that the purpose of the American Revolution was to protect slavery, which is simply false.

History should be critical. And there is a lot to criticize in American history. But it should be scrupulously fact-based, striving for balance and objectivity.

There is an **immense hunger for American history** among the general population. *Hamilton* was a smash hit on Broadway, and serious works of American history and biography routinely top *the New York Times*' bestseller list. The problem is not lack of interest; the problem is that history departments are not teaching what Americans want to learn and what citizens need to know.

Universities were once self-consciously dedicated to the common good and to developing tomorrow's public leaders: men and women with a shared understanding of the problems we face today in historical context, how our political system operates, how it has evolved, and how other nations have addressed similar issues. Representative democracy only works when the citizenry understands political principles and institutions, the origin of the problems we face, and the solutions we have already tried—what has worked and what has failed.

If liberals and conservatives start writing their own histories—teaching and subscribing to the versions that only support their policy preferences—we will share less and less as a citizenry, and civil deliberation will only become harder.