



# **Association of American Colleges & Universities**

## **A VOICE AND A FORCE FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION**

### **Joint Statement on Legislative Efforts to Restrict Education about Racism and American History**

Wednesday, June 16, 2021

We, the undersigned associations and organizations, state our firm opposition to a spate of legislative proposals being introduced across the country that target academic lessons, presentations, and discussions of racism and related issues in American history in schools, colleges and universities. These efforts have taken varied shape in at least 20 states, but often the legislation aims to prohibit or impede the teaching and education of students concerning what are termed “divisive concepts.” These divisive concepts as defined in numerous bills are a litany of vague and indefinite buzzwords and phrases including, for example, “that any individual should feel or be made to feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological or emotional distress on account of that individual's race or sex.” These legislative efforts are deeply troubling for numerous reasons.

First, these bills risk infringing on the right of faculty to teach and of students to learn. The clear goal of these efforts is to suppress teaching and learning about the role of racism in the history of the United States. Purportedly, any examination of racism in this country’s classrooms might cause some students “discomfort” because it is an uncomfortable and complicated subject. But the ideal of informed citizenship necessitates an educated public. Educators must provide an accurate view of the past in order to better prepare students for community participation and robust civic engagement. Suppressing or watering down discussion of “divisive concepts” in educational institutions deprives students of opportunities to discuss and foster solutions to social division and injustice. Legislation cannot erase “concepts” or history; it can, however, diminish educators’ ability to help students address facts in an honest and open environment capable of nourishing intellectual exploration. Educators owe students a clear-eyed, nuanced, and frank delivery of history so that they can learn, grow, and confront the issues of the day, not hew to some state-ordered ideology.

Second, these legislative efforts seek to substitute political mandates for the considered judgment of professional educators, hindering students’ ability to learn and engage in critical thinking across differences and disagreements. These regulations constitute an inappropriate attempt to

transfer responsibility for the evaluation of a curriculum and subject matter from educators to elected officials. The purpose of education is to serve the common good by promoting open inquiry and advancing human knowledge. Politicians in a democratic society should not manipulate public school curricula to advance partisan or ideological aims. In higher education, under principles of academic freedom that have been widely endorsed, professors are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject. Educators, not politicians, should make decisions about teaching and learning.

Knowledge of the past exists to serve the needs of the living. In the current context, this includes an honest reckoning with all aspects of that past. Americans of all ages deserve nothing less than a free and open exchange about history and the forces that shape our world today, an exchange that should take place inside the classroom as well as in the public realm generally. To ban the tools that enable those discussions is to deprive us all of the tools necessary for citizenship in the 21st century. A white-washed view of history cannot change what happened in the past. A free and open society depends on the unrestricted pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

Signed,

PEN America

American Historical Association

American Historical Association

American Association of University Professors

Association of American Colleges & Universities

ACPA-College Student Educators International

Agricultural History Society

Alcohol and Drugs History Society

American Anthropological Association

American Association for State and Local History

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

American Association of Community Colleges

American Association of Geographers

American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education

American Council of Learned Societies

American Educational Research Association

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

American Folklore Society

American Library Association

American Philosophical Association

American Political Science Association

American Society for Environmental History

American Society for Theatre Research

American Society of Criminology Executive Board

American Sociological Association

American Studies Association

Anti-Defamation League  
Association for Ancient Historians  
Association for Asian American Studies  
Association for Counselor Education and Supervision  
Association for Documentary Editing  
Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies  
Association for the Study of Higher Education  
Association for Theatre in Higher Education  
Association of African American Museums  
Association of College and Research Libraries  
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges  
Association of Research Libraries  
Association of University Presses  
Association of Writers & Writing Programs  
Berkshire Conference of Women Historians  
Business History Conference  
Center for Research Libraries  
Central European History Society  
Chinese Historians in the United States  
Coalition of Urban & Metropolitan Universities  
College Art Association  
Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender History  
Comparative & International Education Society  
Conference on Asian History  
Conference on Faith and History  
Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes  
Czechoslovak Studies Association  
Dance Studies Association  
Forum on Early-Modern Empires and Global Interactions  
French Colonial Historical Society  
German Studies Association  
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities  
Historical Society of Twentieth Century China  
Immigration Ethnic History Society  
John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education  
Labor and Working-Class History Association  
Middle East Studies Association  
Modern Language Association  
NAFSA: Association of International Educators  
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education  
National Association for College Admission Counseling  
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education  
National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education  
National Women's Studies Association  
National Coalition for History  
National Council for the Social Studies

National Council of Teachers of English  
National Council on Public History  
Organization of American Historians  
Pacific Coast Branch-American Historical Association  
Phi Beta Kappa Society  
Radical History Review  
Rhetoric Society of America  
Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media  
Scholars at Risk  
Shakespeare Association of America  
Society for Austrian and Habsburg History  
Society for Classical Studies  
Society for Historians of the Early American Republic  
Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era  
Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender  
Society of Architectural Historians  
Society of Civil War Historians  
Society of Transnational Academic Researchers (STAR Scholars Network)  
Southern Historical Association  
The Freedom to Read Foundation  
Urban History Association  
Western History Association  
World History Association