

When Truth Hurts: Reactions to the Piloted AP African American Studies Program

Ricardo Phipps

Abstract

The Advanced Placement (AP) program has a reputation for allowing high school students to earn college credit through rigorous, college-level course work and examination at their high schools. The recent piloting of a new AP African American studies course has generated substantial controversy from critics who have labeled it as divisive and indoctrinating because it includes contemporary, hot-button topics that affect the African American community, such as Black Lives Matter, Black queer studies, and incarceration disparity. This article explores the reactions to the AP African American studies course by some states, particularly Florida, where a ban on the course has already been enacted. At a time when academic freedom is in jeopardy in so many contexts, this reaction to AP African American studies has the potential to place strict limitations on students, teachers, as well as organizations like the College Board that lead curriculum development.

The Advanced Placement (AP) program administered through the College Board, a national education nonprofit most known for its administration of the SAT, has a long history of offering high school students challenging, college-level curricula and the possibility of earning college credits. In 2022, almost 400,000 students registered for over 770,000 AP examinations (Total Registration 2022). The AP program allows high school students to get a head start on their postsecondary education, with the cost savings from receiving college credits for only the price of the exam being a great benefit for some students. Efforts to make AP programming more accessible to students from diverse backgrounds has resulted in students from more elite backgrounds seeking other means of academic challenge and beginning college coursework early (Carlton 2022). Questions are being raised about the appropriateness of course content related to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the most recent controversy arising around the launch of a new AP African American studies course (Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023). Florida has led the charge, with other states following. Their claim that the AP African American studies curriculum is divisive has sparked efforts to have the curriculum significantly changed or banned in these states' public schools. This, in turn, has placed the College Board under pressure to adjust curricula that address social justice issues so that majority students and their parents are not made

to feel uncomfortable by discussions of the power, privilege, and oppression dynamics that have affected marginalized groups in the United States.

In 1952, when the first AP courses were launched in the midst of the Cold War, there was a growing concern that US students were not receiving sufficient academic challenge to compete with their Russian counterparts. High school was viewed as increasingly more essential to career success and as more of a minimal educational path for students in the United States, and the standards for college preparation changed. By 1954, 530 students took AP examinations (Carlton 2022). In these early days, the AP program was primarily used by high-performing, white male students from elite high schools, with exclusivity fueling its appeal (Rothschild 1999). AP exams came to be used to help students gain admission into elite institutions. By the early 1960s, 50 percent of new students at Harvard University arrived on campus having completed AP exams (Carlton 2022). But in those years, few US high schools offered AP courses, with only 14 percent having AP offerings by 1969. Almost thirty years later, in 1997, roughly 50 percent of US high schools offered AP courses, with high schools having high enrollments of Black and brown students often not offering them (Carlton 2022). Some states enacted mandates to increase AP access. A California lawsuit in 1999 highlighted the disparity between AP course offerings at Beverly Hills High School and another high school serving Latinx and African American students almost exclusively (Carlton 2022). As access to AP has increased, many elite independent high schools have shifted their participation in AP to other advanced curriculum programs—such as international baccalaureate diplomas—suggesting that the value of AP credits has diminished because they are accessible to so many. There is also the perception that the rigor of the AP course curricula has been compromised to make success possible for students from less privileged backgrounds (Rothschild 1999).

The first decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by strongly partisan politics affecting many areas of society, including education. Sharp divisions are evident around issues such as affirmative action, recognition of LGBTQ+ culture, and honest discussion of the history of oppression in the United States and whether it generates harmful feelings of guilt and shame in certain children. These attitudes, especially concerning younger students, have impelled attempts to revise curricula in various parts of the country. More recently, attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion programming and curricula are infiltrating secondary education and postsecondary education spaces.

The current portfolio of AP courses includes courses in world history, and especially modern European and US history, all of which contain periods linked to the historical and present-day oppression of certain groups (College Board n.d.). The AP courses in world and European history contain treatment of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. The US history course contains treatment of the colonization of the Americas and Great Britain's exploitation of the colonies. It also addresses the US Civil War and its clear linkage to the enslavement of people of African descent. Ironically, the College Board has unveiled a new AP course in African American studies that has

been attacked for its perceived potential to stoke divisions (Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023). While acknowledging past injustice against Black people in the United States and the contributions of numerous Black figures from the past who championed freedom and equality, the College Board has yielded to pressure from certain political leaders by removing from the African American studies course the requirement that it cover contemporary African American empowerment movements, such as Black Lives Matter, or controversial topics such as reparations. Similarly, topics such as incarceration in the African American community and Black queer theory have also been relegated to the list of optional research themes, no longer deemed necessary to understand the issues that affect African Americans today. While Florida governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Department of Education have led the effort to limit the course curriculum, leaders in several other states, such as Arkansas, Virginia, and Texas, have demanded similar changes to the course (Pendharkar 2023). Some conservatives have criticized the course for not including the voices of Black conservatives, such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023).

The College Board has removed the names of several Black scholars associated with critical race theory, Black feminism and womanism, and the LGBTQ+ experience from the formal curriculum of the AP African American studies course and created space for optional research projects that would lend themselves to study of these themes. While Florida officials have been vocal about their objections to the course curriculum, the College Board has asserted that the changes to the curriculum were implemented independently of Florida's threats to ban the course in its high schools (Burnside and Clary 2023). A letter from the Florida Department of Education to the College Board Florida Partnership labeled the course as "lacking in educational value" (Florida Department of Education 2023). However, the College Board states that Florida's Department of Education declined to provide feedback on the course during the period when it was first developed and feedback was solicited, only later claiming a political victory by alleging that its pressure led the College Board to change the course (Daniels 2023). The possibility that one person's or one jurisdiction's political ideology could dictate nationwide academic curricula poses a serious threat to academic freedom and invites a rebuttal highlighting the importance of education's exposing learners to diverse perspectives so that they can evaluate how these perspectives reflect society's needs. There should be an opportunity to learn about Black conservatism in the AP African American studies course but not at the expense of the opportunity to learn about the history and mission of Black Lives Matter.

While parameters are always needed when developing course content, so that courses are not so broad that they become ineffective, content developers should approach this work aware of their own biases and open to outside vetting to guard against gaps in coverage of some content and overcoverage of other areas. Sally Gimson (2018) has asserted that "rewriting history is a global trend as governments seek to persuade people to believe their version of events." The frightening trend in the United States to suppress the narratives of marginalized people through

academic censorship must be acknowledged and confronted. Having banned the teaching of critical race theory in its K–12 programs, Florida has labeled the framework of the piloted AP African American studies course as critical race theory and consequently illegal in its high schools. Both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump have threatened legal action against Florida’s governor if the ban on the course is not reversed (Pendharkar 2023). Florida has argued that certain content in diversity curricula is not appropriate for the ages of its K–12 students and is unnecessarily divisive for audiences unable to think critically about these topics. An example of the state’s response is the recent Parental Rights in Education bill, which curtails the addressing of LGBTQ+ themes in schools, particularly with children in grades three and below. The AP courses, of course, though offered in the K–12 arena, are taught to help students earn college credits. The philosophy of the College Board is that these courses should be taught with the same rigor and the same content standards as if they were delivered on a college campus, and that the courses should expect the same academic maturity and critical thinking as would be expected of traditional college students.

The first pilot of the AP African American studies course, conducted at sixty schools across the nation, concluded at the end of the 2022–23 academic year. A second pilot will expand the offering to hundreds of additional high schools in the 2023–24 academic year, at the end of which students will take the AP African American studies examination for the first time. Full rollout of the course and exam will take place for all participating schools in 2024–25 (College Board 2023). Exposing rising college students to a robust course in African American studies that fosters critical thinking and helps strengthen students’ understanding of social justice increases the chances that students will consider majors or minors in African American studies, Africana studies, or other diversity-oriented academic programs.

If the pressure leveled against the College Board over course content continues to build, will this affect the types of AP courses that will be created in the future? Much less attention has been given to the AP precalculus course being piloted at the same time as AP African American studies (College Board n.d.). While STEM-focused courses are important to the AP portfolio and encourage students to pursue careers in engineering, information sciences, and natural sciences that are needed to build our nation’s future physical and technological infrastructure, the humanities and social sciences courses in the AP portfolio support college majors and careers focused on how we understand our relationships to each other—past, present, and future—in light of differences. In that respect, education is necessarily political, and the micro-level and macro-level human relationship aspects of education cannot be removed or avoided if education is to help advance any society. To date, there is no AP sociology course (though the existing AP human geography course may cover themes expected in a sociology counterpart). Would a proposal for a pilot of AP sociology be received similarly as AP African American studies, with reservations about the intentional study of theories that highlight power and privilege dynamics?

Silencing hurtful truths and suppressing their discussion in academic circles does not obliterate these truths; rather, it makes it more difficult for societies to learn from their mistakes and more likely that societies will repeat them.

Ricardo Phipps is provost and vice president of academic affairs at St. Augustine's University. A licensed professional counselor, he is active with the American Counseling Association and recently served as president of the Maryland Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development.

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