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January 10, 2013

WHAT KIND OF HISTORY SHOULD WE TEACH?

Posted by **Guest Blogger** in **faculty** and tagged with **history, Jeremi Suri, National Association of Scholars, Texas A&M, university of texas**

*The National Association of Scholars (NAS) today [issued a report](#) on the teaching of American history at the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M. UT-Austin professor Jeremi Suri [wrote a response](#) to the NAS report on the blog of *The Alcalde*, the University of Texas alumni magazine, which we reprint here.*

By Jeremi Suri

About two years ago I moved from Madison to Austin because I was convinced that the flagship university in Texas was building the best group of

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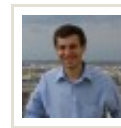
Gwendolyn Bradley
AAUP Concerns

scholars and students in my field of study: international history, foreign policy, and leadership. The History Department at UT already had a distinguished group of faculty who study all parts of the globe and teach about what I call “the making of our modern world.” The History Department also housed the Normandy Scholars Program, devoted to the study of the Second World War, and an Institute for Historical Studies that brings the best scholars from around the world to campus to deepen our historical knowledge. Beyond the History Department, the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs had a Global Policy Studies Program committed to training the next generation of ambassadors, national security advisors, and intelligence analysts. The Strauss Center for International Security and Law on campus sponsored research projects, including undergraduates and graduate students, that explored the making of foreign policy in the past and its lessons for the present.

What we are teaching at UT, in almost all of our history and related courses, is a plural history of how many different people and parts of America relate to one another.

This is a long list. No other campus could compare. That is why I prevailed on my Midwestern wife and my Madison-born children to move from a university that we loved in Wisconsin to the one we believed was doing the very best work in the field of study I care so passionately about. We made the correct decision because UT’s strengths in international history and foreign policy that I listed above are even greater than I realized before I arrived here. In addition, the leadership of UT and its generous alumni have continued to enhance our preeminence in this field of study. Just this week, President William Powers announced the creation of the William P. Clements Center on History,

Over
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Deutsch-
Feldman**
Service in
the Human

First-Year
Composition:
Teaching
or Service?



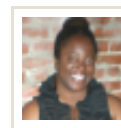
**John K.
Wilson**
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Report on
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Students Return
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**Guest
Blogger**
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What Kind of
History Should
We Teach?



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Aaron

Barlow

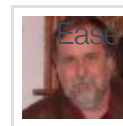
No Longer At

Strategy, and Statecraft at UT. We now have more distinguished historians teaching topics like the Cold War, the Civil War, American Foreign Policy, Strategy and Decision-Making, and the Nature of the International System than on any other non-military campus that I know in the country. I am very proud of that. From what I can tell, our alumni are very proud of that too.

These facts make the ideological claims of the National Association of Scholars about The University of Texas at Austin misleading, and frankly dumb. The report they will release this Thursday is entitled: "Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?" At The University of Texas at Austin the answer is a resounding NO. Nothing in the report should convince you otherwise.

What the National Association of Scholars documents is that many of our courses taught by historians, including me, devote extensive time to lectures and readings about slavery, American Indians, labor unions, women's suffrage, prohibition, civil rights, immigration, poverty, and the rise of suburbs. Some of our courses even discuss Rock n'Roll music, consumer culture, and the Internet. How scandalous! For some reason, the authors of the report seem to think these topics are "un-American." It is almost as if a lesson that does not focus on a president or a war is a waste of time to the writers of this report.

No one cares more about teaching politics, foreign policy, and military affairs more than me. It is what I study. It is what I talk about all the time (so my wife and kids complain!). To teach the history of these subjects requires attention to slavery, American Indians, labor unions, women's suffrage, and everything else I listed above. Politics do not occur



Ease in America
Fish
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Me Again



**Bruce
Janz**
The Path
to
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in Higher
Education:
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Jonathan Rees

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Mahoney**
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Krause**
Comparing
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Who Do We
Disgrace with
Our Honors?
A Modest
Proposal on Gun
Violence in
Our Schools

**Brian C.
Mitchell**

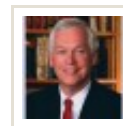
in a vacuum. The outcomes of war are not decided only by a few smart men. Elections, like the one we just experienced, are driven by many factors that include race, class, and gender.

What kind of history should we teach? What kind of history do our students need? They are not well served by simple ideological pronouncements about America as the “greatest nation” or America as the “worst nation,” depending on your point of view. Young people can get extreme assertions on their iPhones without a professor in the room.

What students need is exposure to the complex ways in which various issues relate to one another in the real world. They need to understand how slavery caused a civil war. They need to think about the relationship between big corporations and local workers. They need to examine how mothers and fathers have reacted when their sons and daughters traveled far from our shores to defend our country. These and so many other issues of democracy, economy, and war are connected with the issues of race, class, and gender.

The National Association of Scholars report seems to demand a simple and one-sided history of just a few people. What we are teaching at UT, in almost all of our history and related courses, is a plural history of how many different people and parts of America relate to one another. What we are teaching is the beauty, the color, the promise, and also the challenge of contemporary America. What we are doing above all is to prepare our students to run a business or raise a family or serve their country in a world where success requires making connections between different ideas, memories, experiences, and peoples.

Nothing could be more American. It was, after all, James Madison who defined the greatness of

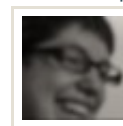


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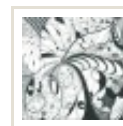


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American democracy as its pluralism. We are teaching pluralism in the history of foreign policy and race, economy and class, and, yes, war and gender. I wish skeptics from the National Association of Scholars and other groups would come and visit some of our courses. They have an open invitation to any of my lectures or seminars.

They have never come. Their report did not include a single campus visit or interview. They did not do their homework. If they did, they would see why I moved to Austin from another great university. This is where serious history is studied and taught so well. If you haven't been back in a while, come and see for yourself.


Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished Professor for Global Leadership, History, and Public Policy at UT-Austin.

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10 Responses

Virginia Fawell Zwickey 

January 10, 2013 at 11:38 pm ∞

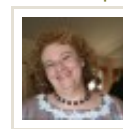
This stood out to me: "What students need is exposure to the complex ways in which various issues relate to on another in the real world." This is what all of our citizens need to know, and many of

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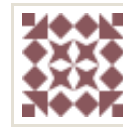
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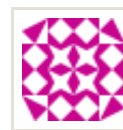
lilianmina2012

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pajanai

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dalynluedtke

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gossetphd

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our political problems are magnified by our ignorance of historical lessons and opinions formed from “sound bites.”

[Reply](#)

bluespapa

January 11, 2013 at 4:46 am ∞



I read Prof. Suri’s article with interest, but wondered if he wasn’t exaggerating the findings of a group calling itself the National Association of Scholars. How could any group of scholars think history is best covered by minimizing these issues.

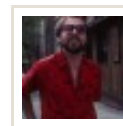
In fact, imagine my shock at reading the report. It reads like groups that have the word “Family” in their title, vehemently opposed to families of same-sex couples, instead of advocating to protect families.

However well documented their findings (hey, that LOOKS like scholarship!), it is astonishing to read a document advocating teaching the “whole” history of America, just not class, race, and gender, and sees in teaching those aspects of American history an attempt to “atone for” America’s past, and that these are “politically” determined in a field that should consider economics and politics, among other topics that seem not to include Americans.

If these are scholars, they seem to be bigoted scholars who resent that their bigoted pronouncements aren’t mainstream, and their unexamined (by them) prejudices remain invisible, but dominant.

[Reply](#)

Pingback: [Publick Occurrences 2.0 » The Value of Studying](#)



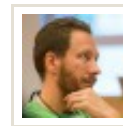
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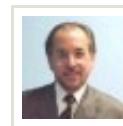
michaelnms

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Joerg Tiede

The Nature of Faculty Represent – Against Cc



philippecorino

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Politics in Context

EvOutWest

January 11, 2013 at 10:12 am ∞



The NAS is part of a hard-right network of conservatives who have been working to undermine what they see as “liberal bias” in academia. They’ve attempted to make it appear on their website that they’re all about getting students to “think for themselves” and that they’re concerned about the “politicization of the classroom,” but historically, they’ve concerned themselves with “liberal bias” and opposed multiculturalism and affirmative action. For more information on them, start with SourceWatch:

[http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=National Association of Scholars](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=National+Association+of+Scholars)

See also the information about NAS in this People for the American Way report (1996), called “Buying a Movement,” about conservative foundations and the money that goes into supporting them and other right-wing organizations:

<http://www.pfaw.org/media-center/publications/buying-movement>

You can download the report in .pdf format off that link. Here’s a quote about NAS from the .pdf

“The National Association of Scholars (N.A.S.), a network of conservative university”
 “professors dedicated to combating perceived “liberal bias” on college campuses, received \$125,000 from Olin in 1994;[footnote 89] Bradley granted \$378,400 between 1990-92[footnote 90] and authorized a two-year, \$150,000 grant in 1994; [footnote 91] the Scaife foundations have contributed more than \$400,000 in recent years;[footnote 92] and the Adolph Coors, J.M. and Smith Richardson

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foundations are also regular contributors [footnote 93]”

More from the report:

Other conservative networks have sprung up to counter multicultural education and progressive academic trends. The National Association of Scholars (N.A.S.), founded in 1985, was created to unite right-wing faculty against “politically correct” multicultural education and affirmative action policies in college admissions and faculty hiring that take race or gender into account. [footnote 110] In addressing issues that are of academic concern across the political spectrum, the N.A.S. has recently been successful in attracting a small number of liberal and moderate faculty, [footnote 111] but the overall thrust of the N.A.S. remains conservative. In lecture halls and on the op-ed pages of many prominent national papers, N.A.S. members across the country put forward the idea that multicultural education, gender studies and affirmative action policies are simply trendy endeavors or throwbacks to 1960s “radicalism.” [footnote 112] Invariably, these programs are described as threats to the study of Western civilization. As of 1996, the organization has approximately 4,000 members (faculty and graduate students), with 38 state affiliates; [footnote 113] it has representatives in the American Sociological Association, the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association.[footnote 114]

Reply

John K. Wilson

January 11, 2013 at 10:18 am ∞



What disturbs me most about the NAS report are not

- tuition
- Uncategorized
- unions
- working conditions

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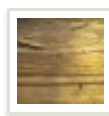
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- By Any Means Necessary
- Changing Universities
- Clarissa's Blog
- College Freedom
- College, Inc.
- Confessions of a Community College Dean
- Crooked Timber
- David Moshman at the Huffington Post
- Digital Digs
- Freethought Blogs
- Gardner Writes
- Here Comes Trouble
- Higher Ed Watch
- Institutional Review Blog

just the inaccuracies identified by Prof. Suri, but the series of disturbing recommendations, including a demand for external review of history departments, affirmative action for hiring conservatives (who are deemed “broad” by the NAS for their refusal to think about race, gender, or class), and state laws with ideological “accountability” aimed at imposing the NAS’ political agenda of banning politics from the classroom.

Reply

missoulahead

January 11, 2013 at 10:44 am ∞



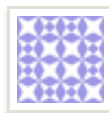
Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the NAS the same bunch of folks who just a couple of years ago claimed that none of the UCs were teaching American history?

Reply

Pingback: **A dumb and dishonest view of American history education in Texas : Historiann : History and sexual politics, 1492 to the present**

Richard Fonte

January 14, 2013 at 6:40 pm ∞



The Answer to your question-What kind of History should we teach, according to the NAS study is comprehensive and inclusive. The NAS believes that all American History courses should involve significant reading assignments covering the topics of slavery, American Indians, Labor Union, women’s suffrage, prohibition, civil rights, immigration, 19th century & 20th century, poverty, and yes, even popular culture. No, we do not think these topics are

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“un-American”. No we do not demand a simple and one-sided history of just a few people—an elite view of history. But, we believe that Political History, intellectual history, military history, religious history and diplomatic history must also be reflected in the student reading assignments. Frankly, we found that this approach to history is more characteristic of Texas A&M for these required undergraduate courses than at UT. Why?

Our review of every reading assignment at the University of Texas found that all too often this comprehensive coverage of all themes in American History was not in evidence through the reading assignments despite the fact that the study double and triple classified articles into as many categories as possible. Yes, we recognize that political history does not occur in a vacuum. A more appropriate mix of themes is clearly evidenced at A&M. Somehow they have found a way to do this. Why not UT. What the NAS believes was the intention of the 1971 law was that students would be provided a comprehensive survey of American History to fulfill their two course requirement in American History. Frankly, we do not find that the “special topics” courses at the University of Texas meet the comprehensive standard. While many of these topics are interesting in themselves, they are intentionally not comprehensive.

Rather than reject the NAS study out of hand, I would suggest the department follow one of the recommendations of the report and develop a concept of a “core competency” of historical knowledge that would be expected by students in these required courses—one that is both comprehensive and inclusive.

You ask what were the purposes of the study. They are stated in the opening sentences of the report—Examine how the 1971 legislative requirement is being fulfilled. Our methodology was to use the tools now provided to any student or member of the public under the “three click rule” to access the

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Theme: **Fruit Shake** by Automattic.

syllabi and academic Vitae of sections and the faculty member teaching that course. Yes, we focused on the reading assignments listed on those Syllabi and classified the content of the reading assignment into 11 categories or themes of history. The overwhelming majority of reading assignments were classified into more than one category. To complete this classification, in reality, what was needed was good reading comprehension and an ability to discern what themes of history are evident in the reading assignment.

We had no prior knowledge as to the content of these readings and frankly we were somewhat surprised by what we found. We were surprised that the reading assignment coverage was so different at the University of Texas versus Texas A&M. While not ideal, A&M does have broader coverage in its reading assignments. We were also pleasantly surprised that those faculty even with strong Race, Class and Gender research interests who used broad readers or reader style textbooks had much broader coverage of historical themes than other faculty. Also, we thought intriguing those faculty that used dual and conflicting textbooks, such as Zinn and Paul Johnson.

The biggest disappointment is the partial abandonment of survey courses by the University of Texas to fulfill the 1971 law. We were not aware of this prior to the study and would urge the department to reconsider whether these courses should fulfill the 1971 requirement. We have no objections to the courses themselves, but they are intentionally not comprehensive as intended by the 1971 law.

Reply

Jeremi Suri

January 14, 2013 at 10:19 pm ∞



We do take the report seriously at UT and we definitely believe in “core competencies.” Here they are: critical thinking, attention to evidence, grappling with different viewpoints, and clear exposition. We have applied these very core competencies to your report, and it fails. So do your comments.

Critical thinking: your report assumes there is only one way to think about history and only one way to define appropriate readings (your models in the report are from the 1940s!) There is no critical analysis of your own assumptions about history teaching or your “race, class, gender” mantra in your report.

Attention to evidence: your uses of evidence is borderline fraudulent. You mis-categorize major books which you obviously have not read carefully. You totally ignore what actually goes on in the classroom — you did not bother to investigate that. You rely on assessments of readings and syllabi from a single reader (who is unmentioned in the report, but whom you identified reluctantly at the press conference on Thursday.) Your main reader who categorized the books is not a historian by training and has no experience teaching history. A student paper with evidence like that would fail any serious college course!

Grappling with different viewpoints: You did not address alternative approaches to teaching history and at least investigate why serious historians might sometimes disagree with you. You have one view and no willingness in the report to give any

credence to alternatives, even though they are embraced by every major historical organization. I guess everyone is wrong except for the enlightened few non-historians who agreed with you before your “study” was even conducted. This kind of narrow-mindedness would also earn an “F” in any college course.

Clarity of exposition: your report is written clearly and didactically, but you leave so much unclear: Who did all the research for your report? What qualifications did he have? What were the purposes of this report? Why did the research design involve simple web searches for titles and no investigation of actual teaching and actual student learning? Who paid for this? Why? What were the purposes? Did the report simply re-affirm what you already wanted to say? Did you test alternative hypotheses, as any good researcher would?

On Texas A&M — you have changed positions, sir, from your report. The report criticizes UT and Texas A&M for essentially the same “problems.” Now you seem to want to back away from criticizing Texas A&M. Why this change of position? Is this because of research or feedback from somewhere else? What is driving this report? Why should we believe a word you say?

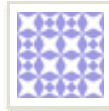
We take our teaching very seriously at UT and we have very high standards and a very strong sense of core competencies. I am also a patriot, a child of immigrants, who deeply believes that all of our young citizens need a broad and deep understanding of American history. We strive to do better

every day and we are open to constructive engagement and suggestions. What you are doing is dropping bombs and throwing around destructive accusations. American history is filled with reckless and self-serving critics, most of whom ended as discredited malcontents.

Reply

Richard Fonte

January 15, 2013 at 10:15 am ∞



Your comment that we relied on assessment of reading content on a single reader is inaccurate. All classifications were checked by at least two others and also publishers notes and book reviews were used to further broaden classifications. Therefore, the attempt was made to classify each reading assignment into as many categories of history as possible. That said, it was disappointing to us that UT did not have higher percentages of reading assignments in areas such as philosophic and intellectual history. The intellectual debates on the American Revolution pro & con were not assigned. No one assigned Burke's reconciliation address, for example. The constitutional convention and ratification process were generally not covered with reading assignments that included the Federalist Papers and the

corresponding anti-federalist papers. It is disappointing to us, for example, that no one at either institution assigned Pauline Maier's American Scripture concerning the Declaration of Independence or anything by Bernard Bailyn. No survey course at UT assigned Gordon Wood's, The American Revolution. These are

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