

November 19, 2020

Maria Markham, Director  
Arkansas Division of Higher Education  
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Email: maria.markham@adhe.edu

Dear Dr. Markham,

The American Historical Association expresses grave concern about a legislative request that has been circulated to academic units in the Arkansas university system. Apparently the Arkansas Division of Higher Education (ADHE) has acquiesced to a legislator's request for data on the teaching of "The 1619 Project" and "Critical Race Theory" at public higher education institutions in Arkansas. While the legislature and ADHE have every right (indeed obligation) to expect quality education on its campuses, the AHA wonders what the goal of this particular inquiry might be. Considering that your US senator has introduced legislation to "prohibit the use of federal funds to teach the 1619 Project by K-12 schools or school districts," and that his ally in the White House has referred to critical race theory as a "horrible doctrine ... a form of child abuse," the agenda seems as obvious as it is objectionable.

The issue here is not whether the AHA agrees with the historical arguments or implications of either the "1619" essays or the complex strands of scholarship that constitute variations on critical race theory. There is little doubt that critical race theory and the *New York Times* "1619 Project" are controversial. But neither the legislature nor the ADHE should be monitoring what qualified scholars are assigning to their students, except as part of a bona fide review and assessment.

The AHA's position on the controversies swirling around the teaching of American history, including the materials in question, is articulated in a [statement](#) endorsed by 46 organizations representing a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. We hope that you will not only read that statement, but make it available to faculty members who have received the survey generated from the inappropriate legislative request.

As historians, we know that the current moment is not the only, or even the most, divisive time in our nation's history. Vigorous debate, when grounded in evidence and with a commitment to preserving rather than splintering the body politic, only makes our communities and our nation stronger. Our students deserve this from us. Let us take inspiration from Thomas Jefferson, whose life embodied many of the tensions and contradictions that bedevil us now, and assert: "We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

Sincerely,



James R. Grossman  
Executive Director

CC Donald Bobbitt, University of Arkansas System President; Robin Bowen, Arkansas Tech University President; Jim Borsig, Henderson State Interim Chancellor; Houston Davis, University of Central Arkansas President; Charles Welch, Arkansas State University System President