

May 2, 2023

Dear Members of the Florida Senate:

The American Historical Association registers strong objection to SB 266. While the bill text references “an evidence-based approach to history,” as well as “traditional, historically accurate, and high-quality coursework,” in fact, this bill proposes to allow the study of the past only through an exceedingly narrow and tendentious frame. Those grand invocations of history ring hollow to historians who read the whole bill. SB 266 will degrade the quality of learning in colleges and universities across the state of Florida, especially in general education history courses.

In March, the AHA issued a [statement](#) opposing HB 999, expressing “horror . . . at the assumptions that lie at the heart of this bill and its blatant and frontal attack on principles of academic freedom and shared governance central to higher education in the United States.” SB 266 contains many of the provisions that caused the AHA and 84 other scholarly organizations such alarm.

The bill contains provisions for establishing a statewide set of core courses to form a general education curriculum. We agree that core humanities courses should “afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture.” But SB 266 contains a specific requirement that all humanities core courses “must include selections from the Western canon.” This provision would violate the bill’s own ban on courses that “distort significant historical events.” A robust general education curriculum must feature coherent histories of Asia, Africa, and Latin America without requiring faculty to foreground European perspectives. SB 266’s exclusive focus on the “Western canon,” “Western and American Civilization,” and unspecified “Great Books” is unnecessary. Florida’s universities already offer rich and compelling courses on the history and culture of Europe and the United States. In effect, then, the new provisions would serve only to restrict the extent to which history faculty are allowed to introduce Florida students to non-Western civilizations. Should it be illegal for a general education course on the history of Japan to focus on Japanese sources and perspectives? One hopes not. This bill’s impoverished vision for learning about the human past and its narrow, top-down mandates fatally undermine any hope of fulfilling the stated goals of evidence-based history, open inquiry, and civil discourse mentioned elsewhere in the bill.

At a time when Florida could offer its students the best educational opportunities to stay competitive in the world economy, the bill’s repeated emphasis on teaching only a thin slice of history to all students in required courses would hobble students and deprive them of the chance to become global leaders.

Requiring that boards of trustees sign off on the curricula to be offered by faculty members is a straightforward assault on the academic freedom that remains a bedrock of higher education in the United States. This bill would not only enable—but *require*—classroom-level intervention by boards whose expertise and responsibilities lie elsewhere. The requirement that boards of trustees approve

lower-division courses represents a level of surveillance and implied censorship that has no place in a republic noted for its admirable commitment to academic freedom and innovation.

I urge you to reject SB 266.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and "R".

James R. Grossman
Executive Director

The American Historical Association is America's largest and oldest organization of professional historians, with over 11,000 members engaged in the teaching and practice of history at colleges and universities, secondary schools, historical institutes, museums, and other institutions. The AHA membership represents every historical era and geographical area. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life. Everything has a history.