

Open Letter to the Academic Senate of the California State University and Chancellor White

March 5, 2019

Dear Chancellor White and Senators:

We the undersigned, representing the Departments of Political Science, History, and related fields, share concerns and objections to recent proposals to alter the way in which most students in the California State University system acquire competency in essential areas of knowledge of citizenship, government, and American history, a requirement legally enacted in Title 5 Section 40404 as the American Institutions Requirement.

In the recent Final Report of the Taskforce on General Education, established by the ASCSU and Chancellor's Office in 2017, among the proposals offered for consideration is a proposal that would serve to minimize and undermine the American Institutions requirement.

On page 11 of the Final Report, the Task Force states:

Another area made visible by the proposed structure is “Democracy in the U.S.” The Task Force acknowledges the Trustees’ requirement to ensure that all CSU graduates “acquire knowledge and skills that will help them to comprehend the workings of American democracy and of the society in which they live to enable them to contribute to that society as responsible and constructive citizens” (Title 5, section 40404). This requirement is called ‘American Institutions,’ and Title 5 is silent on the number of units to be devoted to this endeavor. Currently, most campuses require 6 semester units in the area, and some campuses include these units within their GE program, while others do not. In addition, campuses variously “double count” such coursework. The Task Force deemed it appropriate that this Cross-cutting Value be integrated into the GE program as a 3-unit core value that contributes to the intentionality and coherence of the GE package rather than a stand-alone, supervenient graduation requirement.”

Despite their claims, we think the intent of Title 5’s language is clear. The report neglects to quote from the next part of Title 5 which states:

To this end each campus shall provide for comprehensive study of American history and American government including the historical development of American institutions and ideals, the Constitution of the United States and the operation of representative democratic government under that Constitution, and the processes of state and local government.

It is clear that the Title 5 envisions two separate courses of content and a thorough grounding in the history and politics of California and America. Only by ignoring the substance of the requirement would anyone think that a single three-unit class could fulfill all its parts even

poorly, let alone successfully. There is no rationale offered beyond a vague claim that it could be done—with which we do not agree and which is not substantiated—and that it should be done.

We believe that Chancellor’s Executive Order 1061 implementing Title V provides an outline of the minimum content needed to provide a “comprehensive study of American History and American Government...” Some of the topics included in the EO 1061 included significant events covering a minimum of 100 years, the role of major ethnic and social groups, the continuity of the American experience, the political philosophy of the Framers, operations of American institutions, rights and obligations of citizens, the California Constitution and working of California government. This content cannot be covered in one semester in even a superficial way. In fact, prior CSU documentation demonstrates that the CSU believes that AI has too much content to be included in one course. This characteristic is stated explicitly in the documentation that the chancellor’s office uses to review community college courses that are proposed to articulate with CSU AI courses: “It has also been our experience that reviewers tend not to support outlines that attempt to include in one course the content required for all three areas.”

We believe that the American Institutions requirement as established is of vital importance for students in the modern world; that it is essential to our role in educating an active and informed citizen body capable of participating knowledgeably.

We believe it was the intent of the California Legislature to establish this as a specific requirement, articulated individually, because the California Legislature recognizes the importance of knowledge of American and Californian politics and history for citizenship in a democracy.

The importance of the goals of the American Institutions requirement, the language and spirit of the legislative requirement established in Title 5, and the needs of America and the State of California for an educated citizen body need to be honored. While other proposals for changes in General Education requirements may merit consideration, the proposed diminution of the American Institutions requirement, or its attempted fulfillment through a single class, are suggestions we wholeheartedly oppose. In 2019, a greater knowledge of history, politics, and democratic processes and institutions is more important than ever before, and there is no path to provide that same knowledge with less dedication or time. We are united in our concern that the CSU system is considering such suggestions and, while recognizing the faculty are best positioned to design the curriculum of the campuses of California State University, we are anxious to alert those who oversee the University system to a proposal we consider out of compliance with legislative requirements and legislative intent—and with the interests of the State of California.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned.

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