

Higher Education and the Health of Democracy: In Solidarity with CSU

Resolution 2023 - 04

Whereas, The Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) Academic Senate is the organization whose primary function is to make recommendations with respect to academic and professional matters (Title 5, §53200) and is primarily relied upon for curriculum, educational program development and student preparation and success (Board Policy 3255);

Whereas, Mt SAC, one of the largest community colleges in California serving nearly 20 local communities,¹ is empowered by its Mission and Vision to serve the “community through improving economic achievement, advancing civic engagement, enhancing personal well-being, developing critical thinking, and enriching aesthetic and cultural experiences” and is animated by the Chancellor’s Offices call for California Community Colleges to remain “accessible and personal institutions that can help students on an individual level regain their hopes and rebuild their futures” where the core vision is to put students first², and;

Whereas, The United States History, Constitution and American Ideals Requirement, commonly known as the American Institutions Requirement, in Title 5 §40404, “ensure(s) that students 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” is a vital part of the California Community College mission, not just California State University system, and is as vital today as it was 60 years ago when it was written into law to ensure an educated, informed, and empowered citizenry³, and;

Whereas, The CSU History Council, a group of historians from across the California State University system, have published in their March 2023 American Institutions Memo⁴ “insist(ing) that the American Institutions requirement is an essential requirement, and is more important than ever to an accessible, equitable, and comprehensive higher-level education for California’s diverse college students” and “contends that understanding the history and government of American Institutions and values as mandated by Title 5 has become even more important to the education of all students of California’s public colleges and universities and should be preserved in a manner that effectively meets the needs of all students”, and;

Resolved, The Mt SAC Academic Senate stands in solidarity with the message articulated in the March 2023 American Institutions Memo from the CSU History Council to oppose “any reduction to or weakening of the American Institutions requirement and strongly oppose a wholesale move of American Institutions to an upper-division requirement” and call for “transparency with the CSU Chancellor’s Office, the CSU Academic Senate, and respective representatives in the California State Assembly ... to actively seek input and guidance from

¹ Mt SAC Facts and Figures <https://www.mtsac.edu/about/overview/facts-and-figures.html>

² Update to the Vision for Success: Reaffirming Equity in a Time of Recovery (July 2021, pg. 5) <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/Reports/vision-for-success-update-2021-a11y.pdf>

³ 2022 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/americans-civics-knowledge-drops-first-amendment-and-branches-government>

⁴ CSU History Council, American Institutions Memo Opposing Changes to American Institutions Requirement – Attached

stakeholders and disciplinary experts from all three segments of public higher education in California, as curricular discussions continue”, and;

Resolved, The Mt SAC Academic Senate joins with the hundreds of History and Political Science faculty from throughout the California Community Colleges who have signed a petition⁵ to support the CSU History Council’s memo in recognition of the essential role these American Institutions courses provide for our students as pathways to understanding their essential rights and responsibilities in this polity.

Contact: Kelly Rivera, Mt. SAC Academic Senate Director

Approved by Mt. SAC Academic Senate April 20, 2023.

⁵ Petition of California Community College Faculty to Support the CSU History Council on American Institutions [AI/Title 5 outreach to California Community Colleges - Google Docs](#)

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY HISTORY COUNCIL, MARCH 2023

The American Institutions requirement—Section 40404 of Title 5, the California Code of Regulations which governs the California State University—stipulates the requirements in United States History, Constitution, and American ideals. This legislation, codified by the California legislature in the 1960s, is explicit with regard to the purpose of the law. Every campus in the California State University system is obliged to “ensure that students 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.”

We, the CSU History Council—a group of historians from across the California State University system—insist that the American Institutions requirement is an essential requirement, and is more important than ever to an accessible, equitable, and comprehensive higher-level education for California’s diverse college students. Recent legislation, however, has brought this invaluable requirement into question.

[The Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2021](#) (AB 928) purports to streamline the process by which California community college students transfer to a four-year university by legislating a single general education pathway of no more than 34 units. Governor Gavin Newsom and lawmakers in favor of the bill celebrate the law’s objective to strengthen the state’s innovative economy and remove barriers to its premier higher education system, thus enabling *all* Californians to realize their dreams. Whereas we appreciate the intention of AB 928 to enhance equity through simplifying and improving student transfer, doing so should not come at the expense of a student’s complete education in our University system and in our state.

In response to AB 928, Interim Chancellor Jolene Koester charged the General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) to explore the implications of AB 928 on the American Institutions requirement. Acknowledging that the American Institutions requirement is “not general education,” but is often “double-counted with lower-division GE requirements,” Interim Chancellor Koester posed the question “How shall we incorporate US History and Institutions into CSU degrees in a manner that is equitable for both first time students and transfers?”

We, the CSU History Council, are unanimously in agreement that the requirement must be maintained. We adamantly reject any reduction to or weakening of the American Institutions requirement and strongly oppose a wholesale move of American Institutions to an upper-division requirement. Moreover, we assert that the college-level study of U.S. History and Government is consistent with the legislation's purpose and essential to improving upon a legacy of student opportunity, success and achievement because learning about America's institutions, constitutions, and values is essential to understanding democracy, enhancing equity and inclusion, and instilling career readiness skills.

History education is invaluable to open discussions about the sources of, development, and challenges to American democracy. The long-standing state requirement (Executive Order 405) to complete coursework in American history and government is testament to the necessity of teaching and learning history in a healthy democracy—but is especially so given recent attacks against democratic institutions and representatives. Current initiatives in many school districts in the United States, including in California, compromise students' ability to learn the knowledge and skills required for a functioning democracy. The revisions to history curriculum and texts aim to restrict freedom of speech and inquiry by banning certain concepts, especially the role of race and racism among other forces in shaping the nation's origins and evolution. Such attempts to hide history prevent students from learning a complete and accurate history of American politics, economy, society, and culture—that is, the history of American democracy. Rather than engage in critical thinking about differences and disagreements in the past—an engagement that would inform how they might peacefully express and manage the significant differences and disagreements of our present—students will be left in the dark. Historical learning in the classroom can and should shape public life and civic engagement. Thus, college-level U.S. history courses at California's public universities offering unfettered tools, language, and perspectives have become even more essential.

History teaches the fragility and importance of our democratic institutions and past struggles of diverse groups to achieve fairness, justice, and impartiality within those institutions. History, of course, educates students about the branches and separations of power in government, election systems, and political parties. But historians also emphasize the role of grass-roots social movements, including non-violent protests but also radicalized resistance, as historical examples of democracy in action. History animates students to be active citizens and demand the promises of

American democracy by showcasing the inspiring, if harrowing, lives of the many people of our shared past (Frederick Douglass, Francis Perkins, Fred Korematsu, Zitkala-Ša, Dolores Huerta— to name a very few) who labored and risked their lives to make the United States abide by and practice its stated principles. By appreciating figures and patterns of the past, students can identify pathways of inclusion for their present.

In addition to complex, uplifting historical knowledge, college-level U.S. history courses teach the skills necessary for successful careers in an increasingly sophisticated society and world. Based upon a 2022 survey conducted by The National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers ranked critical thinking, communication, and teamwork—skills fundamental to historical study—as the most important competencies for job candidates. (<https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/recruiters-and-students-have-differing-perceptions-of-new-grad-proficiency-in-competencies/>) Historical study develops one’s empathy and respect for a wide variety of viewpoints and fosters critical and creative thinking grounded in diverse sources ranging from maps, speeches, court decisions, songs, and letters, to large scale data sets, government documents and papers, photographs, and constitutions. College students of U.S. history learn to ask difficult questions and assemble answers from disparate and often conflicting traces of the past, prioritizing nuanced and data-driven conclusions. They also learn to clearly, respectfully, and persuasively communicate their hard-earned findings in memos, essays, correspondence, social media, and exhibits as well as formal and informal speeches. Although history instructs students to think and produce independently, they often work collaboratively on research projects, in-class exercises, and presentations, mastering the abilities to compromise and lead which are the hallmarks of successful teamwork.

In conclusion, the CSU History Council contends that understanding the history and government of American Institutions and values as mandated by Title 5 has become even more important to the education of all students of California’s public colleges and universities and should be preserved in a manner that effectively meets the needs of all students. We demand transparency with the CSU Chancellor’s Office, the CSU Academic Senate, and our respective representatives in the California State Assembly. We call for those same entities to actively seek input and guidance from stakeholders and disciplinary experts from all three segments of public higher education in California, as curricular discussions continue.