

An Examination of the AP United States History Exam Free Response Section

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Abstract: Michael S. Henry examined the first 30 years of the AP United States History exam's essay section. This study examined changes that have occurred over the last 20 years by classifying questions into one of six categories and found little change in the types of essays used during this timeframe.

Students enter a classroom for a course in United States History with certain expectations. The students expect to be confronted, whether in the secondary classroom or at a university with a history of extraordinary events and people (Filene, 1980). They anticipate a history of soldiers, senators, ambassadors, and presidents. It is a history of elections, treaties and wars. This follows a traditional pattern of exploring history established in the 19th century.

However, the traditional method of teaching history has been in direct opposition to the presentation of modern American history survey courses at universities. Universities for the most part abandoned the traditional form of history in the 1960s and have moved towards social history and an understanding of America's significance within the larger international context. Guarneri (2002) discussed a trend in internationalizing of survey courses at the university level. This is not just how America relates through foreign policy and war; instead, it looks at how domestic affairs are affected by foreign affairs and conversely how American domestic affairs now affect the rest of the world. In addition to the movement towards examining American history through an international context, historians have also turned to sub-national groups and their impact upon American history (Frank, Wong, Meyer, & Ramirez, 2000). This history focuses upon women and minority groups such as Native and African Americans and their effect upon the society within the nation.

The secondary curriculum has maintained much of the traditional historical slant as defined by Filene. Of the secondary curricula for American history, the Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH) exam by the College Board is considered one of the most rigorous. It is sought after on college transcripts as it is intended to replicate the American history survey course offered at the university level. APUSH is one of the oldest AP tests. It was one of the original 11 exams given in 1956, AP's first year. Through its history it has been an important test in secondary curriculum. Of the 3,698,407 AP exams given in 2012, 427,796 were APUSH (College Board, 2012a). This represents almost 12% of the total AP exams taken worldwide. This is second only to English Language and Composition.

The College Board has designed the course to be equivocal to an introductory course in U.S. history at the university level. The College Board describes the course:

The AP U.S. History course is designed to provide students with the analytic skills and factual knowledge necessary to deal critically with the problems and materials in U.S. history. The program prepares students for intermediate and advanced college courses by making demands upon them equivalent to those made by full-year introductory college courses. (College Board, 2012b, p. 5)

As changes in the syllabi of university courses steer in new directions, it should be expected that the APUSH course would do the same. As such, the test for the 2014-2015 school year of the Rehm, J. (2013). An examination of the AP United States history exam free response section. In M. S. Plakhotnik & S. M. Nielsen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 12th Annual South Florida Education Research Conference* (pp. 173-180). Miami: Florida International University. Retrieved from http://education.fiu.edu/research_conference/

course will undergo a major overhaul. This is the first major change since the introduction of the Document Based Question (DBQ) in 1973, which replicates the methodology of the historian through the writing of an essay in which test takers analyze and use primary source documents in their response. Over the 40 year span since the introduction of the DBQ, university courses in American history have moved away from history as a primarily political narrative to an examination of the social and cultural factors related to the political narrative. Examining the Free Response Questions (FRQ) of the APUSH test should give insight into whether the APUSH test, and thus the course to prepare for the test, has made the same transition as its college counterparts. It may also give insight as to the direction in which the revamped test will turn in 2014.

To accomplish this, the researcher has updated and used a categorical framework of question analysis created by Michael S. Henry (1994) to examine the FRQs of the APUSH exam. Henry looked at the first 30 years of APUSH FRQs to determine whether the APUSH test changed as the examination of history in university courses changed. Henry's research showed the dominance of traditional forms of history over themes of social history that have grown to become more relevant in university curricula. The changes in the college courses have accelerated over the 20 years since Henry's research. This study has examined the past 20 years worth of FRQs from the APUSH test to determine if trends have changed since Henry's work in the early 1990s answering the following questions:

- What are the trends on the FRQ questions of the APUSH test over the last 20 years?
- Do the FRQ questions of the APUSH exam reflect more of the material taught in equivocal university courses or high school courses?

Collegiate vs. Secondary Curricula

Foster and Crawford (2006) have compared the education curriculum to a battleground where the winners of the war define the cultural politics of the nation state. The winners have incorporated their values into the dominant ideology representing society's communal knowledge passed down through the educational curricula. The field for this battle has been the elementary and secondary curriculum. Collegiate survey courses in US history have broken from this primary form of enculturation. This has led to the disconnect felt by students when they transfer from secondary school curriculum to the curriculum found in universities as noted by Waters (2007). In the desire to inculcate the students into the cultural wants of the politician, the two curricula seem almost incompatible. The curriculum of secondary education has created an idealized version of history presented for the maintenance of society's status quo (Waters, 2007). Thus, students exited their secondary education with an idealized picture that accentuates any of their preconceived notions related to either a conservative or a liberal political background. Collegiate curricula have been more likely to focus upon and analyze the instances of society failing to live up to its ideals. Therefore the history presented in the university has been made up of a variety of elements in the field of history that include qualitative studies, local and oral traditions, the history of various social subgroups, and connections between history and the other social sciences (Rosenzweig & Weinland, 1986).

Research has shown that the dominant mode of instruction used at both the secondary and collegiate levels is the textbook (Goodlad, 1984). Therefore, the content included in the courses of each can be ascertained from an investigation into the content of textbooks from both secondary and collegiate courses. Henry (2011) noted that the view of history in the texts for secondary education did not address the conflicts and inconsistencies of American culture instead focused upon the elites of society and the events that occurred. The secondary text rarely

presents an analytical or oppositional view and leaves an intellectual vacuum. Collegiate texts instead presented a critical view incorporating the interests of the poor and powerless, incorporating moral and political shortcomings of the nation (Henry, 2011).

The APUSH curriculum transitions between the two curricula in an attempt to meet the standards of the states' departments of education and the curricular requirements of the universities. This paper helps to establish which of the two curricula that the APUSH test conforms to and thus which curriculum is presented in class. History curricula in America take two divergent and often dissonant paths. In general, the K-12 curriculum views American history as a triumphal past to be learned as a set of facts. The goal then of the curriculum is the reproduction of these facts as sacred texts within the next generation (Waters, 2007). The college curriculum has been in a state of flux for the past one hundred years. The focus of what is history has shifted from the nation state to the society with supra and sub national foci (Frank et al., 2000). The shift originated with research initiated after World War II and transitioned into the classrooms of universities and colleges upper level history courses and specifically into the American History survey course. This can be seen by changes in scholarly publications in the 1950s. The approach, context, and material shifted in academic works (Brown, 2003). This led to changes in upper level history classes where the topics shifted away from imperialism toward racial and ethnic minorities, women, and social class (Frank et al., 2000). This change is also reflected in the textbooks for those courses.

APUSH Description

The APUSH test was first administered in 1956. It was one of 11 tests designed to give academically gifted students the opportunity to bypass introductory classes at the university level. AP tests were designed to determine whether the established curriculum of the school and the rate of progress of the student sufficed to replace the introductory course at a university (Rothschild, 1999). Tests showed whether students learned enough in their preexisting curriculum to have gained the requisite knowledge of an introductory college course. The tests allowed students to exempt themselves from the introductory class and eliminate redundant curricula (Casserly, 1968). The APUSH test has had several iterations during its existence. It began solely as an essay test. A multiple choice section consisting of 25% of the student's score was added. In 1984, the number of multiple-choice questions increased. With this change, the weighting of the multiple-choice section increased to 50%. In 1973, the DBQ was added. More recently, in 1994, a second non-DBQ essay was added for a total of three essay questions.

Method

The study continues a longitudinal study originally conducted by Henry (1994). Therefore, this study has been conducted using a variation on Henry's six categories. I have eliminated his fifth category, *Historiographic Issues*, because even in Henry's research there had not been a question addressing the history of history since 1972 (Henry, 1994). I did this with the belief the addition of the DBQ required the test taker to demonstrate an understanding of and the ability to use the historical process. With the DBQ, questions related to historiography were redundant and thus eliminated. I also made slight adjustments to the wording of Henry's (1994) categories in order to clarify what I believed to be vague wording. The categories are as follows:

1. Intellectual and cultural issues: Questions addressing how literature, art, architecture, and religion influenced United States history.
2. Minority Issues: Questions addressing the role of African Americans, women, Native Americans, and other minority groups in the development of United States history.

3. Political issues: Questions addressing the evolution of political parties, legislative action, Supreme Court rulings, presidential administrations, and reform movements.
4. Military and diplomatic issues: Questions addressing American involvement in armed conflicts and relations with other nations.
5. Economic and business issues: Questions addressing employment, monetary policy, labor relations, and industrial and agricultural development.
6. Immigration issues: Questions addressing trends in immigration to and within the country and how immigration influenced American development.

I placed all 151 FRQ questions asked between 1993 and 2012 into one of these six categories. To assist in the validation of my categorization I asked two APUSH teachers to also categorize the questions. All three of us categorized the questions independently with the same set of procedures. Only one category could be selected for each question. Categories were not to be chosen based just upon the wording of the questions but on an assumption of the questions' intended outcome. For example, 1995s question number two which asked students to illustrate their answer using legislative assemblies, commerce and religion was categorized as military and diplomatic because all three had to be related to Britain's policy of salutary neglect. This led to an agreement on 118 of 151 questions equaling to a 78% concordance rate. Of the 33 questions where there was disagreement, 32 of the questions had agreement by two of the respondents and all three respondents categorized only one question differently.

Once consensus scores were created, all scores were placed into a matrix and as with Henry's original study divided into five-year intervals (see Table 1). The questions were also separated secondarily into DBQ and formal essay to see if any differences occurred between types of questions (see Table 2).

Results

The categorization of the FRQs led to findings consistent with Henry's study. Comparing totals to those of Henry's original findings revealed slight variations occurred. The distributions remained consistent between studies and over time. The Political category remained the dominant mode of questioning with 52 questions or 35% of the total questions coming from this category over the last 20 years. In Henry's analysis 37.6% were Political. The largest change took place in the Minority category moving from 10.2% in Henry's original findings to 18% of the total questions in this study. When looking at the rank order for the first 30 years Henry found Political (37.6%) was first, followed by Economic/ Business (19.0%), Military/ Diplomatic (17.7%), Minority and Intellectual/ Cultural tied (10.2%) followed by Historiography (2.8%) and Immigration (2.3%). The rank order in my study changed commensurately with the rise in the number of questions from the Minority category. The percent for each of this study's categories was as follows: Political (34.4%), Minority (17.9%), Military/ Diplomatic (15.9%), Economic/ Business (14.6%), Intellectual/ Cultural (11.3%), and Immigration (5.3%).

From 2002 through 2011, the APUSH test incorporated a B form so that two tests for each year existed with separate questions available adding to the total number of questions that could be categorized in those years. Comparing numbers directly between the years did not give an accurate picture of change; therefore, a comparison of percentages was necessary. Slight variations in percentages that took place between 5-year periods could be due to the arbitrary nature of the test and where the breaks in periodizations took place. Even so, Political was the most used category in each of the 5-year periods. In addition, when looking at the results year

over year, each year and form had at least one question from the Political category. The increase in the number of questions from the Minority category demonstrates growth in the social questions that more closely approximate the collegiate curriculum. However, after periodizing the data, the rate of growth in the Minority questions was not consistent over time and cannot be looked upon as a specific long-term trend without further analysis.

Only minor differences were found between the DBQ and essay questions. When the categories were placed in order based upon the number of questions from each category, the DBQ and essay had the similar order with Political being most used and Immigration being the least used. The only difference was the placement of Military/ Diplomatic and Minority in the ranking. In the DBQ Military/ Diplomatic and Minority were equal at 5 questions (16.7% of the questions) and in the essay section there were 27 Minority questions (18.2%), and 22 Military/ Diplomatic questions (15.7%).

Discussion

The data indicated that slight changes have taken place in the APUSH test and thus curriculum over the last 20 years. These results supported the assertion that while the APUSH test has made a shift towards a sociocultural history the course has not made the same shift as the college curricula that it is intended to replicate. Instead, it appeared closer to the static nature of the traditional high school curriculum.

The test relied heavily upon Political and Military/Diplomatic questions, which comprised approximately 50% of the questions. This supported the assumptions the APUSH test and corresponding curriculum more closely replicated the high school curriculum. This then was more similar to the sacred curriculum focused upon elite individuals and political policy described by Waters (2007). It also supported the conclusions made by Henry (2011) that the high school curriculum, even the rigorous APUSH course, is limited in its presentation of the poor and marginalized. This is especially true on the question that most mirrors the historian's task and is the most analytical of questions: the DBQ. In the DBQ, Political (43.3%) and Military/Diplomatic (16.7%) comprise 60% of the total questions over the past 20 years.

A definite, quantifiable shift towards the social history has become more prevalent in college survey courses in American history. It appears both the APUSH test and course failed to meet up with the level of change and integration, which occurred in colleges and universities. The increase in questions in the *Minority* category mirrored the findings of a topic shift to minority groups found by Frank et al. (2000). Yet the Intellectual/Cultural has remained consistent with the findings from the first 30 years. In addition in the most recent decade the number of questions from that category has remained the same while the overall number of questions has increased due to the B form. Because of this, Intellectual/ Cultural questions have declined to 8.5%. The decrease in the Intellectual/ Cultural category is related to Rosenweig and Weinland's (1986) findings of a connection between history and other social sciences at the collegiate level. The connections seemed limited in the APUSH test as well. The only other social science well represented was economics. This could be that economic expansion is such a large part of American history in general as well as economic growth meeting the criterion of the sacred as presented in Water's analysis of high school curricula. Intellectual and Cultural questions made up a small and apparently shrinking percentage of the questions on the APUSH test. Yet topics from this category made up the greatest proportion of history in the collegiate curricula (Rosenweig & Weinland, 1986).

These findings are limited, as only half of the test was analyzed. Certain categories that were infrequently addressed in the FQRs might receive greater coverage in the multiple-choice

section of the test. While assumptions about the curricula were made from the analysis of the test questions, there is no guarantee the curricula will mirror the content of the categories. The AP program gives teachers latitude in their presentation of history. That being said, the goal of the class is to have students pass the AP test and thus it is in the teacher's best interest to align his or her curriculum to the test in order to achieve the greatest possible percentage of students passing the test. The other major limitation of this work was the categories themselves. The categories separated the questions so certain common themes within the questions could emerge. While the categories revealed a large degree of stagnation in the curriculum, only assumptions could be made as to whether the APUSH test reproduced the high school curriculum or the collegiate survey course.

In order to meet these limitations, a slight reworking of the categories and a revamping of the categorization with a larger number of APUSH teachers would lead to greater validity and reliability through more precise categories and greater consensus. Further research also needs to be conducted to understand the trends within the classroom by surveying the respondents whether they believe their curriculum matched the questions and intended outcomes of the free response section. Lastly, a similar analysis of released multiple-choice questions might reveal changes in the percentages of each category addressed throughout the test.

Little change has appeared to occur in the APUSH test over the last 20 years. Tests addressing of questions regarding minority groups appear to rise. This could also be due to minor fluctuations more related to the vagaries of question making than to any concerted effort on the part of the test's supervisory committee to make changes consistent with the collegiate curricula. This can be seen from 2003 to 2007 where 46% of the questions were Political. During this timeframe nine of the ten sets of questions had at least two Political and five out of the ten sets had three questions. No other time frame has so many of any one type of question. This could be due to the arbitrary divisions of timeframes. Had the 5-year span been divided differently the percentages would not have been as high. Still the progress towards what is happening in collegiate survey courses is slow and leaves APUSH in a different place than the courses it is supposed to replicate. The overhaul to be implemented in 2014 appears, based upon this analysis, to be necessary in order for the APUSH test to better align itself with the collegiate curricula it is supposed to replicate.

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Table 1

FRQ's by Five Year Period

Year	Intellectual / Cultural	Minority	Political	Military/ Diplomatic	Economic / Business	Immigration	Total
1993-1997 <i>n</i>	4	4	8	5	3	1	25
%	16%	16%	32%	20%	12%	4%	100%
1998-2002 <i>n</i>	5	5	9	4	6	1	30
%	16.7%	16.7%	30.0%	13.3%	20.0%	3.3%	100%
2003- 2007 <i>n</i>	4	7	23	6	7	3	50
%	8%	14%	46%	12%	14%	6%	100%
2008-2012 <i>n</i>	4	11	12	9	6	3	45
%	8.9%	24.4%	26.7%	20.0%	13.3%	6.7%	100%

Table 2

Totals and Percentages of Questions from Each Category

Categories	DBQ <i>n</i>	DBQ %	Essay <i>n</i>	Essay %	Total <i>n</i>	Total %
Intellectual/ Cultural	2	6.7%	15	12.3%	17	11.3%
Minority	5	16.7%	22	18.2%	27	17.9%
Political	13	43.3%	39	32.2%	52	34.4%
Military/ Diplomatic	5	16.7%	19	15.7%	24	15.9%
Economic/ Business	3	10.0%	19	15.7%	22	14.6%
Immigration	2	6.7%	6	4.9%	8	5.3%