

March 3, 2025

Dear Chair Evans, Vice Chair Taylor, Ranking Member Quirmbach, and Senate Education Committee Members,

The American Historical Association registers strong objection to core provisions of House File 402 (HF 402) and its companion Senate File 322 (SF 322). This legislation threatens to undermine the quality of history instruction at Iowa's public universities and community colleges, tarnishing the reputation of these world-class institutions of higher learning.

The AHA endorses the expansion of history and civics education in Iowa. Many colleges and universities across the country incorporate these disciplines into general education requirements, as they should. Learning history can often be an effective strategy for producing well-rounded college graduates with skills necessary to succeed in the workforce and participate in public life.

Unfortunately, HF 402/SF 322's glaring flaws far outweigh any potential educational benefit for Iowa students. The bill creates a new, three-credit "survey course in American history and civil government" as a "requirement for the completion of any baccalaureate degree program," but imposes unwieldy and overly specific requirements that will constrain educators and undermine student learning. Yes, let us require students to learn American history and principles of civic participation—but not through a course that is weighted down with excessive baggage that would make it impossible to navigate the main currents of our nation's history.

The one-semester course outlined in this bill fails to do justice to the rich and vibrant history of the United States. Faculty and departments across Iowa already teach two-semester sequences in US history. Many do so exceedingly well. History educators understand how to design compelling courses that engage students and prepare them for future success as citizens and as contributors to the economic vitality of the region. HF 402/SF 322 mandates that instructors cram twice as much content into half the time. Its extensive provisions require all faculty to assign at least 10 specific historical sources spanning the entirety of American history; impart "an understanding of the landmark cases of the United States supreme court and their effects on law and society"; and provide a careful review of 250 years of the development of the US government, all while somehow imparting "devotion to American institutions and ideals." This hodgepodge of overly prescriptive mandates will leave students with neither time nor opportunity to read, think, contextualize, and analyze the past.

The AHA is confident that history education rooted in professional expertise and disciplinary integrity can inspire patriotism in American students through deep and honest engagement with our nation's past. But this bill rejects good history, demanding instead that faculty instruct students how they should *feel* about the nation's past.

HF 402/SF 322 is neither for nor about Iowa. Its many mandates have little to do with its distinctive regional history, the needs of Iowa students, or the realities of college classrooms across the state. It strips Iowa educators of most decisions about what college students should learn about US history. That's because the text of HF 402/SF 322 is copied nearly verbatim from model legislation promoted by a national coalition of education activists headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York City.

We suspect that many Iowans would prefer that students enroll in courses designed and taught by someone at their local university as opposed to out-of-state activists.

The AHA recommends more effective ways of improving the historical knowledge and civic awareness of college graduates. History faculty in Iowa need little encouragement to teach the founding documents of the United States. It would be far more productive to give them the instructional time and resources they need to do so in accordance with professional norms, or to engage them in discussions about how the state government can best support solutions tailored to the needs and aptitudes of Iowa students.

We advise expanding this requirement to a two-course (six-credit-hour) sequence similar to what is already being offered at Iowa colleges and universities. Texas might provide a useful point of comparison. Decades-old legislation requires all undergraduate students at the state's many public colleges and universities to complete a two-semester survey in US or state history, leaving control over most course content to individual faculty and institutions. To make a similar requirement feasible in Iowa, however, would also require funding to hire additional full-time instructional faculty with appropriate expertise to teach sections of these courses.

All students deserve the right to learn history and historical thinking. Students, faculty, and academic departments are much better situated than state legislators to make decisions about how we learn history and how best to assess that knowledge. Our organization urges your committee to heed the faculty at Iowa's public institutions.

With more than 10,500 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world. 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 imperative of historical thinking in public life.

Everything has a history. If passed, HF 402 would waste time, money, and resources to undermine the quality of public higher education in Iowa.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

James R. Grossman
Executive Director