

# The College Board's Rocky Path, Through Florida, to the A.P. Black Studies Course

The nonprofit met with Governor DeSantis's state officials, who asked whether the course was "trying to advance Black Panther thinking."



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On the second night of Black History Month, a sparkling crowd of academics and teachers gathered at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture to celebrate the unveiling of the first ever Advanced Placement course in African American studies.

But clouding the festive mood was a nagging concern. Compared with the original plans for the high school course, it now lacked, or had less of, certain topics that people at the gathering thought were essential to the discipline, like Black Lives Matter and reparations. And they wondered if the explanation was pressure from Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, a probable Republican presidential candidate who has railed against what he calls "woke indoctrination" in schools.

What could explain the missing mentions of queer studies and police brutality, and the new inclusion of Black Republicans, like Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice?

Standing onstage, David Coleman, the chief executive of the College Board, the billion-dollar nonprofit that administers the SAT and A.P. courses, addressed the doubters in the room.

"They are some of the most serious criticisms that have been leveled at the A.P. program in its history," Mr. Coleman said, somberly. But no, he said to the guests, the motivations for the changes had been pure.

In the days since, the conflict has grown only more vitriolic. In an extraordinary back and forth last week, the state of Florida released a chronology of its communications with the College Board, seeming to take credit for alterations in the A.P. course.

The College Board, which relies on state participation to administer its tests, has fired back, saying that changes were made after hearing from teachers about what worked, and politics had nothing to do with it.

In a statement on Saturday, it said that the governor and the Florida Department of Education were posturing to stoke publicity: "We have made the mistake of treating FDOE with the courtesy we always accord to an education agency, but they have instead exploited this courtesy for their political agenda."

And, in a statement to The Times, the College Board added that the Education Department showed "ignorance and derision for the field of African American studies."

In today's political climate, a dispute may have been unavoidable. African American studies has roots in the civil rights and students' movements of the 1960s. Its left-leaning scholars often see their discipline as part of an anti-racist social justice movement.

For many conservatives, the field is an example of liberal orthodoxy run amok. They have argued the very premise of it, and called for an approach to Black history that focuses on heroic figures of the past and stays away from contemporary political debates or academic theorizing.

But the College Board also hurt its own cause among supporters, by whittling away material during the months it was engaged in discussions with the DeSantis administration, according to interviews with scholars, teachers and College Board officials, as well as a review of several drafts of the curriculum.

The organization also did not tell some of its academic colleagues of those frustrating discussions — or about the significant omissions.

Now, the College Board is defending the A.P. course it has spent years developing. The nonprofit has infuriated many African American studies scholars for what they view as a stealth betrayal. And its once-heralded course is mired in dissension.

Greg Carr, an African American studies professor at Howard University and an adviser on the curriculum, said the high school class is a step forward, and that it was unrealistic to expect it to look like a true college-level African American studies course. "The College Board is not revolutionary," he said.

"It maintains the status quo in this country — the hierarchy, the formation. The question we have to ask ourselves is what is possible."

## The Choice

For over a decade, there had been talk about the need for some kind of Advanced Placement course focused on the Black experience.

But after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 inspired global protest, the College Board decided to roll out an African American studies class, with a strong emphasis on United States history, politics and culture. The selection of African American studies instead of a more conventional history course was pivotal, putting the staid, mainstream College Board into close contact with a left-leaning group of scholars deeply engaged in contemporary politics.

The discipline, also called Black studies or Africana studies, toggles between the past and present, melding history, the arts and theory. In introductory classes, the achievements of ancient African civilizations might be taught as a source of pride, while the legacy of Jim Crow might be traced into the lives of Black Americans today, in the education, housing and criminal justice systems.

By the spring of 2021, the College Board had hired a young scholar to direct the course's development and began collecting college syllabuses. It also met with students and professors, all in an effort to build consensus on what the class should be.

In the fall of 2022, it launched a pilot class to try out an early version of the curriculum. Darren Williams, a social studies teacher in Tulsa, Okla., was part of the group. His students, most of whom are Black, Hispanic or Asian American, were deeply moved by lessons on lynching, he said, and had rich discussions about the death of Tyre Nichols after a brutal beating by an almost all Black group of police officers in Memphis.

While the College Board wants all students to take the course, it also hopes to address one of its biggest issues: persuading more Black students to take A.P. exams, where they are historically underrepresented.

The Board, a nonprofit, describes its mission as connecting students to college success, and it has been extraordinarily influential. There are signs, however, that its influence could be waning.

The SAT, which it administers, has come under increasing fire from critics who say that standardized testing exacerbates inequities across class and racial lines.

The SAT's uncertain future underscores the College Board's increasing reliance on its more than three dozen A.P. classes, already the organization's biggest revenue producer from student test fees and government subsidies.

The African American studies class, because it is an elective in most states, would not attract enough students to make any kind of difference to its finances, the College Board said.

But against the wider backdrop, the College Board's revenue relies, in part, on big states such as Florida, the nation's third most populous and also its fastest-growing. More than 30 states, including Florida, provide funding to assist students who want to take A.P. exams, according to the College Board.

## What's In and Out

Courses often change significantly during the development process, especially as teachers and students engage with pilot material. The College Board has said that for African American studies, concepts were cut to narrow the breadth of the course. And some topics were added, such as a deeper focus on the African experience in Brazil.

The College Board also said it initially experimented with assigning specific authors, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, who wrote the influential Atlantic magazine article "The Case for Reparations," and Michelle Alexander, the civil rights lawyer best known for her book "The New Jim Crow," which argues that mass incarceration today is an extension of systems established under slavery and segregation.

But the Board eventually abandoned that idea, saying that like other A.P. classes, reading lists should be left up to local discretion.

Still, there is a notable political valence to many of the revisions, according to a Times review of four documents outlining the course, dated February, Fall and December of 2022, and February 2023.

The February 2022 document, based mostly on a survey of college syllabuses, included Black queer studies, womanism (a form of Black feminism), mass incarceration, reparations and Black Lives Matter.

It stated that students should understand "structural racism," "racial formation" and "racial capitalism."

And the February document also included intersectionality, a fundamental concept in Black studies that refers to the complex ways that overlapping categories of identity — such as race, class, sex and gender — shape individual experiences of the world.

Over the following 11 months, most of those concepts gradually dropped out of the course's required topics.

By July, when high school teachers attended a training conference for the A.P. course at Howard University, "queer studies" was no longer in the pilot curriculum for fall. Mass incarceration, reparations and Black Lives Matter were now optional weeklong units.

Intersectionality remained — for the moment.

## A Meeting in Florida

The College Board understood from the beginning that introducing African American studies could draw sparks, especially given the laws in Florida, Jason Manoharan, vice president for A.P. program development, said in an interview.

"We weren't living under a rock," Dr. Manoharan said. "We chose to pursue the course anyway."

Dr. Manoharan, who was permitted by a College Board spokesman to comment only about his interactions with Florida officials, said communication with the state began in a pedestrian fashion. After the College Board applied for a "course code," which would allow the course to be offered, officials asked whether the course would align with state law.

In September, a letter notified the College Board that the course would be rejected. That led to a Zoom meeting in November, Dr. Manoharan said, which he attended with a College Board official based in Florida, and four or five state officials.

"What became clear very quickly is that these were not content experts," said Dr. Manoharan, who has a Ph.D. in English from Harvard.

The state officials first asked whether the Black Panther Party was taught as a historical topic, or whether the course was "trying to advance Black Panther thinking," Dr. Manoharan recalled. He said he explained that the Black Panthers were a common part of introductory courses, and "that is not something that we can change or compromise."

Another official, he recalled, asked, "I see this term intersectionality. What do you mean?"

The fall 2022 pilot curriculum required a weeklong set of lessons on "Black Feminism, Womanism and Intersectionality." Required reading included a text by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the law professor who coined the term.

As Dr. Manoharan explained the concept, the state officials were “stone faced,” he said, and he was not sure they understood him.

“I have interacted with many DOEs — this DOE acts as a political apparatus,” he said of Florida’s Department of Education, adding, “It’s not an effort to improve education.”

He said that overall, Florida had not given useful feedback about what was wrong with the course, and he had been baffled and frustrated about how to respond.

“If they had substantive issues, I would have listened to them,” he said. “I welcomed their feedback. Not because I wanted to collude with them, but because I’m a responsible person who wanted to understand if there was something legitimate that they had to say.” Florida officials declined to comment.

Following those discussions, intersectionality gradually faded from the course.

By the final document, the term was mentioned only as an optional project topic, and there was no mention of Professor Crenshaw.

“The word intersectionality does not appear in the framework, that is true,” Dr. Manoharan said. “But the concept, the essential concept,” is there.

Calling himself the primary decision maker, Dr. Manoharan said the word had been removed because it had been co-opted.

“I don’t think it’s effective to use a word that is basically drained of its meaning and filled up with political rhetoric,” he said. “I think kids need to know the concept. And they need to understand the importance. But I don’t think we need to create a needless battle over a term that has been compromised by disingenuous voices.”

## For Black Studies Scholars, a Surprise

As the College Board prepared to unveil the final curriculum, leading Black studies scholars heard rumors that politics had influenced the revision process.

“We all suspected that the changes to the curriculum were prompted by political pressure,” wrote Robin D.G. Kelley, a historian at the University of California, Los Angeles, in an email.

On Jan. 31, one day before the final course was unveiled, Dr. Kelley and several scholars — including Professor Crenshaw and the legal theorist Cheryl Harris — met by Zoom with College Board executives, to ask if they had engaged in negotiations with the DeSantis administration.

“We were told by Trevor Packer that there was absolutely no communication with them,” Dr. Kelley said, referring to the head of the A.P. program.

The College Board wrote in an email that Mr. Packer had told the scholars, “There was no academic input from Florida on this curriculum.”

When the final course was released, a new set of concepts was now mentioned only in passing, as optional topics for a final project: reparations, incarceration and Black Lives Matter.

The term “police brutality” disappeared. But Black Republicans, such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, were added.

And there was a preamble that the College Board said will now accompany other A.P. courses as well: “A.P. opposes indoctrination. A.P. students are expected to analyze different perspectives from their own, and no points on an A.P. exam are awarded for agreement with any specific viewpoint. A.P. students are not required to feel certain ways about themselves or the course content.”

Professor Harris, the U.C.L.A. legal scholar, said the course’s legitimacy had been called into question.

“There is no way you can properly teach this material under the rubric of what DeSantis et al. are demanding,” she said. “This is a train wreck.”

Darius J. Young, a history professor at Florida A&M University who served on the development committee, said he was also surprised by the final curriculum, which he saw the week the course was going to be released.

“There were some things that we expected to be in the final product that, for a variety of reasons, may have been edited out,” Dr. Young said.

He was particularly taken aback that intersectionality had been removed, he said, adding that he did not know the back story. “I understand

the pushback from the academy,” he said. “We all want to be great stewards of Black studies.” Andrew Fischer contributed research.