

SECTION FIFTEEN: FEEDBACK FROM CONSULTATIONS WITH POST-SECONDARY EDUCATORS

Alberta Learning conducted post-secondary consultation forums at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and at the University of Calgary. Each forum was organized and hosted by the respective university's Department of Secondary Education. Participants in these forums represented social science disciplines, including history, political science, sociology and economics, as well as language and philosophy departments and education faculties. In total, 28 post-secondary educators participated in the two forums; roughly one third of the participants completed and submitted the questionnaires.

Post-secondary educators observed that Alberta's existing social studies program was very successful in producing questioning, skeptical, independent-thinking students with well-developed critical thinking skills.

They claimed, however, that graduates of the program were deficient in other areas, including research skills, discussion skills, reading skills and writing skills. Post-secondary educators recommended that students spend more time on the development of these important skills.

While university professors recognized the value of writing position papers, they suggested that students learn how to write other types of papers as well, including research reports, book reviews and thesis papers. They noted that students would probably not write a Social 30-style position paper in college or university. Therefore, they advised that students get some training in writing the type of papers that they will do at the post-secondary level. They also recommended that all graduates of the 10–20–30 program should know how to use footnotes and produce bibliographies.

At a consultation forum, one professor suggested that the "Exploration of the Issue" requirement of the high school social studies essay was a corruption of the essay model. He maintained that nowhere outside of Alberta social studies classrooms were students being taught to write this type of essay. He suggested that, after three years of writing papers containing artificial issue-exploration add-ons, first-year university students required remedial instruction on how to write a proper formal essay.

Most post-secondary educators called for a program that would cultivate depth of knowledge about certain topics rather than superficial understanding of many different topics. They suggested that rushing through content and cramming for examinations could not produce enduring knowledge or understanding.

Social sciences professors also maintained that the current 10–12 social studies program covers issues too quickly and superficially, and yet requires students to take and defend positions on these issues. They observed that this encourages "a rush to judgement" rather than a serious reflection about the issue or a careful formulation of an informed and well-considered defense of position. These professors recommended that the new social studies program cover fewer issues and deal with select issues in more depth. They suggested that this would result in fuller appreciation of the complexity of issues/topics and more reasoned and mature development of points of view.

Post-secondary educators pointed out that plagiarism has emerged as a major problem at colleges and universities. They recommended that outcomes related to research and writing ethics be included in the new high school social studies program.

Several university professors criticized the testing culture that currently predominates in Alberta high schools. They noted that the routine quizzes and regular unit examinations of high school social studies are not continued at the post-secondary level where examinations are, relatively speaking, few and far between. In a social sciences course at university, for example, students typically write only one or two examinations per course; in contrast, a typical high school student may face eight or more major examinations and many quizzes in a course like Social Studies 30. One university professor suggested

that, given that the same testing culture now pervades all subject areas in grades 10 to 12, students were undergoing three years of misguided “test abuse” in high school. Several professors suggested that high school educators should reduce the frequency of formal testing in order to better prepare students for writing examinations at university or college.

At consultation forums, post-secondary educators conceded that only a minority of Grade 12 graduates would ever enroll in social science courses at universities and colleges. They also recognized that social studies was a mandatory program for all high school students—not an optional program like Physics that could be chosen by students based on interest or aptitude. Nevertheless, they maintained that social studies was the only program capable of preparing students for post-secondary studies in history, law, economics, political science, geography, anthropology, sociology, psychology and other social sciences. Consequently, they advised that Social Studies 10–20–30 be designed as a university/college preparation program. They hoped that the academic rigor of this program would be maintained or enhanced. They did not want it to be reduced through de-streaming or a common Grade 10 program.

Finally, some post-secondary educators called for additional social science course options to be made available for high school students. For example, several professors suggested that an optional course be developed for Grade 12 students who were planning to enroll in social science programs at colleges or universities; this course would concentrate on developing advanced skills for post-secondary studies in history, law, political science, economics, etc.

A representative sampling of post-secondary educators’ written recommendations can be found in Appendix 16 of this report.