

February 14, 2023

Dear Trustee,

The time has come to end David Coleman's tenure as the CEO of the College Board. For more than a decade, **Mr. Coleman has repeatedly put product before mission and made people of color pay the price.** The debacle of the College Board's response to the Florida Department of Education's rejection of the Advanced Placement African-American Studies (APAAS) is only the most recent example of the harm Mr. Coleman has repeatedly done both to Black people and to the College Board itself.

Consider the track record (expanded on in the supporting document):

1. **The Redesigned SAT Put English Language Learners at a Disadvantage, and the College Board Tried to Cover It Up.**
2. **The AP US History Framework Played Down Racism's Impact on American History to Appease Conservative Critics.**
3. **David Coleman Used a School Shooting as an Occasion to Celebrate AP Programs (and Correct a Woman of Color).**
4. **The College Board Refuses to Take Responsibility for the Racist History of the SAT.**
5. **The College Board Hid the Environmental Context Dashboard after Conservative Criticism.**
6. **David Coleman Hired, Donated to, Promoted, and Praised a College Board Vice President who Voted for a Bill Restricting What Teachers Can Teach about Race and Racism.**
7. **The College Board Caved to the Florida Department of Education's Attack on APAAS and then Misled Everyone about Caving, Deeply Damaging the Credibility of the Organization and Irreparably Harming the College Board's Relations with the Black Community.**

The irony is that Coleman's efforts to appease Conservatives typically end with the College Board alienating both the Left and the Right. [Republican media have been crowing for weeks about Gov. DeSantis's victory](#) and are calling it [a blueprint for a war on the education establishment and the AP program itself](#). The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) letter released on Feb 8, 2023 undermined David [Coleman's claim](#) that the AP Program "does not look to the statements of political leaders: so much that [people on the left](#) and [on the right are calling for the end of AP](#). *That would be a disaster.*

**The best path forward for the College Board is new leadership. The best chance to save APAAS and the AP Program is new leadership.** As the College Board pushes forward with

APAAS and with a redesigned digital SAT, it enters a new and challenging phase of its existence. **The organization can no longer afford the great risk that the CEO has already put it in and will assuredly do so again.**

The College Board has never had a woman in charge of the organization, this despite the fact that women represent a majority of students in higher education and of people who work in college admissions, and it has had only one president who is a person of color. **The time has come for the Board of Trustees to seek out a new CEO.** As Roderick Ferguson—a Yale Professor whose work on Queer Black Studies was removed from the APAAS framework—recently put it, “[We need to interrupt the social reproduction of cowardice.](#)” The Board of Trustees can do so by removing David Coleman as CEO of the College Board.

Please find our supporting document underneath. Thank you for your service on the Board.

Sincerely,

## Supporting Document

David Coleman's tenure as CEO of the College Board is not without accomplishments:

- Annual revenue grew from \$759M in June 2012 to \$1.1B in December 2019 and the College Board weathered the financial challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The number of students taking the SAT grew from 1.66M in the class of 2012 to 2.2M in the class of 2020. The SAT regained its position as the most popular college admissions exam in the nation over this time period as well.
- 2.1M students took an AP exam in 2012; 2.8M took an AP exam in 2019. Over the last 10 years, the number of U.S. public high school graduates who've taken an AP Exam has increased by 65%, while the number who have scored a 3 or higher on at least one AP Exam has increased by 63%.
- The College Board began offering school day SAT in several states and districts. By 2022, 63% of test takers took the SAT in school. School day exams have been shown to increase college-going rates among students from low-income backgrounds.
- The College Board created the Environmental Context Dashboard, which provides admissions officers a richer understanding of an applicant's home neighborhood and high school. The ECD represented a sea change for the organization as it recognizes that merit needs to be understood in context.
- The College Board created an Advanced Placement African American Studies course.

These successes are not small, and as the CEO who oversaw them all, David Coleman deserves credit, as do the employees of the College Board responsible for these ideas and their execution.

But what also is not small are the number and the size of the mistakes that Mr. Coleman and the College Board have made during his tenure. Before considering a list of some of these mistakes, note how frequently they follow the same pattern:

1. Under Mr. Coleman, the College Board changes or creates products that are marketed as ways to address racial justice and equity.
2. The products are criticized by politicians and pundits, typically right-wing ones.
3. Mr. Coleman abandons students of color and changes the products in order to assuage conservatives and thus shield the College Board and himself from criticism.

To date, Mr. Coleman has not been held accountable for his failures of leadership or the harm he has done to the College Board's standing with students and families of color. Now is the time for the Board of Trustees to hold him and the College Board accountable for its record of failures. The following list does not attempt to account for every mistake made by David Coleman or the College Board over the past decade. It focuses on the most troubling aspect of his time as CEO.

## College Board's Failures Around Matters of Race and Equity under the Leadership of David Coleman

### 1. The Redesigned SAT Put English Language Learners at a Disadvantage and the College Board Tried to Cover It Up.

After an article questioned the harm that wordier math questions might have on English language learners, the College Board sought to refute the claim, only to discover the problem was even worse than the critic suggested. Coleman had publicly claimed that one of the motivations for redesigning the tests was to increase access. His favorite line about the new SAT was “assessment without opportunity is dead.” Creating opportunity for students historically shut out of college was a stated priority for the redesigned SAT and creation of Khan Academy.<sup>1</sup> About the latter, Coleman said, “Never in my career have I seen a launch of technology at this scale that has broken down the racial divisions that so haunt this nation—never.”<sup>2</sup> And yet the first impulse of the organization under his leadership when faced with the possibility that the redesigned SAT could be creating barriers to opportunity was to discredit and deny. **English language learners were a valuable asset for marketing the test, but they were a liability when it came to designing it.** The College Board ultimately shortened its math questions, but only after its negligence was exposed.

*Who is watching over the College Board now to ensure that the new digital test will not create new barriers for students? There is, for instance, the very large question of the digital divide and how it will affect an exam for which all practice is delivered online or needs to be printed out from PDFs. According to one source, “28 million households are not connected to the Internet, and two-thirds of those can’t afford it—disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx communities.” That source is the College Board Foundation, which was created to close the digital divide but appears not to have held a single event or published a single report since its creation. How will students from those 28 million households prepare for the SAT?*

---

<sup>1</sup> In a high profile piece in the [New York Times Magazine](#), Coleman describes a meeting with Wade Henderson, the president and C.E.O. of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. Henderson told him “about the ill will that had been built up in the minority community over the SAT, how the test has long been viewed not as a launching pad to something better but as an obstacle to hard-working, conscientious students who couldn’t prepare for it in the way more affluent students could. Coleman acknowledged ‘the extent to which the exam recapitulates income inequality.’ Henderson also expressed concern, Coleman said, that poor SAT scores could block access to jobs.” Coleman characterized the conversation as “deeply moving.”

<sup>2</sup> 2022 is the only year that the SAT score gap between Black and White students was smaller than it was in the first year of the redesigned SAT, and that was because the average score of White students dropped to a new low, as did the average for Black students. In 2017, 2018, and 2020 the gap was 177 points. In 2019, it was 180 points. In 2021 it was 178 points, and in 2022 it was 172 points.

**2. The AP US History Framework Played Down Racism's Impact on American History to Appease Conservative Critics.**

After a new framework for AP US History (APUSH) came under fire from conservatives in 2014 and 2015, the College Board revised it and deemphasized the role that racism has played in American history. As one journalist described it, "The biggest difference between the old framework and the new one is that the new version spends much less time on white Americans' beliefs about racial and cultural superiority." These changes were not motivated by recommendations from history professors and high school teachers; they were motivated by the pique of right-wing critics.

*This reaction will feel familiar to the Board of Trustees, since it is so similar to what happened with APAAS. The College Board, under David Coleman, attempted to create an APUSH course that better reflected American diversity and reckoned with the hard truths about race and racism, but when pressured, the organization retreated. There is no reason to expect anything but more of the same the next time a Republican governor complains about an AP course or, for that matter, the digital SAT, which currently promises to "accurately and fairly portray the diverse peoples of the United States and the world."*

**3. David Coleman Uses a School Shooting as an Occasion to Celebrate AP Programs (and Correct a Woman of Color).**

One week after the murder of seventeen students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018, David Coleman sent an email to College Board members about the shootings that looked to many readers as an attempt to advertise AP courses on the back of the tragedy and which insulted one of the activists from the high school who was mourning her dead classmates. He wrote, "I was struck...by this remarkable speech by Emma Gonzalez...One of the things that makes Emma's speech so striking is that it is infused with references to her AP Government class. At a time of utmost passion, she insists that she has been trained in evidence." If the opportunism here was not bad enough, Coleman made things much worse by thinking the letter was the appropriate moment to teach a lesson to a teneager who not incidentally is a woman of color and who just survived a shooting. He continues, "I do not write today to endorse Emma's every word; her speech may have benefited from a less partisan approach and an attempt to better understand the positions of gun rights proponents." Why did Mr. Coleman take the time in a letter that was supposed to express grief and admiration to clarify that he was not endorsing Ms. Gonzalez's attacks on the gun rights lobby? Because, as the reaction to the Florida Board of Education's letter made clear and the criticism of APUSH made clear, David Coleman is afraid of Republicans and is willing to insult people of color in order to appease the Right.

*David Coleman's fear of Republicans should cause grave concern among the Board about his ability to lead the organization in the future. As we head into a Republican primary in 2024, attacks on higher education and teaching students about African American and LGBTQ people will likely increase and become more extreme, as those attacks have proven popular with the Republican base, even as most Americans find them repulsive. Consider the example of J. D. Vance, who spoke with Coleman as a featured guest at the College Board Forum in 2017. Vance is a graduate of Ohio State and Yale Law, and yet to appeal to Republican voters in his Senate race he declared in 2021, "I think if any of us want to do the things that we want to do for our country and for the people who live in it, we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country." What will Mr. Coleman do if Sen. Vance, Gov. Abbot, Gov. Huckabee, Gov. DeSantis, Gov. Youngkin, Donal Trump, or any Republican politician adds the College Board to their list of targets in the coming year? The organization cannot afford another scandal like the one currently swirling around it.*

4. **The College Board Refuses to Take Responsibility for the Racist History of the SAT.** In October 2018, *Teen Vogue* published an article entitled "The History of the SAT Is Mired in Racism and Elitism." The main charge was that the SAT was created by a eugenicist with the intention of establishing the superiority of white people of European descent. The claim that the SAT is an instrument of white supremacy did not originate with the article, but *Teen Vogue* and the work of Ibram X. Kendi greatly amplified it. When you add to that origin story articles like one that appeared in the Atlantic magazine showing that the University of Texas looked to SAT scores in the 1950s as a way to prevent campus integration or the persistent racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in SAT scores, the SAT looks more and more like a weapon serving inequality and white supremacy rather than dismantling them. The repeated characterization of the SAT as racist has become so common that it was made several times by members of the UC Regents in their deliberations over whether to continue requiring applicants to submit exam scores and in the lawsuit that ultimately pushed the UC system to end consideration of SAT scores. There may be legitimate arguments to be made to push back against the characterization of the exam as racist, but the College Board has remained largely silent on this issue and utterly silent on the ways in which the SAT has been used to racist ends in the past.

*David Coleman's strategy for responding to the characterization of the SAT as racist—namely, a strategy of silence—was a preview of his reaction to the Florida Board of Education's truly racist description of APAAS as "lacking educational value" and amounting to nothing more than indoctrination. Mr. Coleman has not denounced those descriptions of the course and called out their racism. David Coleman does not provide*



*the leadership College Board deserves. Indeed, he does not provide leadership at all when it comes to people of color.*

**5. The College Board Hides Away the Environmental Context Dashboard.**

In May 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article about what it called the “adversity score.” The article suggested that the adversity score would “make room for more ...[poor and minority] students [colleges] want to admit” and that with “a finite number of spaces, . . .someone has to suffer and that will be privileged kids on the bubble.” What the article was describing was the Environmental Context Dashboard, which used public data about high schools and neighborhoods to create a score for students to indicate the level of advantage/disadvantage they were likely to have experienced. It put the SAT score in context and represented a major step in the evolution of the College Board. As Coleman himself put it, “There are a number of amazing students who may have scored less [on the SAT] but have accomplished more.” The WSJ piece went viral, largely fueled by panic from the white and wealthy, and gained the College Board a lot of negative attention, particularly from the Right. In August 2019, the College Board announced that it would no longer provide an adversity score, and it rebranded the ECD as Landscape. Or as the New York Times put it, “SAT ‘Adversity Score’ Is Abandoned in Wake of Criticism.” (Compare that to the recent headline, “The College Board Strips Down Its A.P. Curriculum for African American Studies.”) The College Board effectively abandoned this free product, which was designed to help underrepresented students, in order to appease conservatives and wealthy critics afraid they would lose their advantage in the college admissions process. Coleman also announced “after [the 2019] admissions cycle, the board would begin reporting school and neighborhood disadvantage scores to students and families.” Two years after that cycle, those scores have not been shared with students and families. Little in fact about Landscape has been shared. The landing page for Landscape has not been updated since 2019. It is not clear how many universities continue to use Landscape, since the College Board has largely stopped discussing it.

*Here again we have another instance in which a project aimed at increasing equity and diversity was changed after conservative criticism. ECD and APAAS should have been the crowning achievements of Mr. Coleman’s tenure at the College Board, but instead they became the greatest sources of controversy and his largest failures. Will the College Board rename and hide away APAAS as it continues to come under political attack? How can the Board of Trustees be confident Mr. Coleman will not follow the path of retreat he has followed thus far on every effort the College Board has made to address equity?*

**6. David Coleman Hired, Promoted, and Praised a College Board Vice President who Voted for a Bill Restricting What Teachers Can Teach about Race and Racism.**

In 2022, the Indiana House Speaker Todd Huston voted in favor of a bill banning the teaching of “divisive concepts” in schools. Indiana was one of many states where these bills came up for a vote. The bills played on racial animus and caricatured important elements in African American Studies, including Critical Race Theory and intersectionality. Huston was not just the leader of Indiana House Republicans, however; he was also a Senior Vice President for State and District Partnerships at the College Board. David Coleman’s response to Huston voting against what the AP program stands for was—as usual when the attacks came from the left—silence.<sup>3</sup> Huston was not removed from his position. He eventually resigned, and when he did Coleman sent a letter to all his employees that praised Huston as a “great boss” and said, “Todd leaves the College Board with a number of extraordinary achievements in delivering our mission.” It is to be hoped that one of those achievements was not cultivating across the College Board the same contempt he felt for teaching students about racism. Was David Coleman a great boss when he hired Huston not long after becoming CEO, donated \$10,000 to his election, and sat by while the senior vice president of the organization’s state relations began supporting a political agenda that could well have been used to ban the teaching of several AP courses, including but not limited to APAAS.

*Can David Coleman be expected to hire people who will stand up for the values of the AP Program going forward?*

**7. Under David Coleman’s leadership, the College Board Caved to the Florida Department of Education’s Attack on APAAS and then Misled Everyone about Caving, Deeply Damaging the Credibility of the Organization and Irreparably Harming the College Board’s Relations with the Black Community.**

What has transpired with APAAS since Jan 18, 2023 has been the lowest moment in David Coleman’s tenure as CEO. The College Board has made so many mistakes and caused so much harm that it requires a list:

**1. The College Board Did Not Stand Up for APAAS when the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) Said It Lacked Educational Value.**

When the FDOE letter to the College Board announcing the course would not be permitted in the state became public, David Coleman had an opportunity to stand up and defend the course and to denounce as racist the assertion that the course has no educational value. Millions of people and Black people in particular felt deeply insulted by the FDOE’s description of APAAS. This was a chance for the College Board and David Coleman to take a stand for and with people of color and to give voice to their outrage. As a *New York Times* editorial put it, “The College Board could have sent a powerful message by standing with [Black

---

<sup>3</sup> The bill did not pass after the author of the Senate version said it “would require high school history teachers to be ‘impartial’ when discussing Nazism.”



students and teachers]. Instead, its gestures at accommodation threw them under the bus.”

2. The College Board Purged Writers and Topics from the Course Requirements and Placed Them in a Ghetto of Optional Topics .

Instead of standing up for APAAS, the College Board, under David Coleman’s leadership, released a revised framework for the course on February 1, 2023: the first day of Black History Month. It reflected changes that had been made at some point after November 16, 2022, which is when, FDOE asserts, “College Board acknowledged that the course would undergo revisions.” On or around July 1, 2022, the Florida Department of Education expressed concern that APAAS “preview materials appear to include content that may not be permissible” in Florida classrooms. The College Board must have provided some preview materials to FDOE earlier that year, if not the full framework itself. After FDOE once again objected to the course content, the “College Board stated that items such as ‘systemic marginalization’ and ‘intersectionality’ were integral elements of the course and could not be removed.” For all intents and purposes, however, those items were removed from the new framework because they were no longer included in the content of the course tested on the APAAS exam but were relegated to AP Classroom as possible topics and texts in a research project. The FDOE took note. In a letter sent to the College Board on February 7, FDOE wrote, “*By no coincidence*, we were grateful to see that the College Board’s revised February 1, 2023, framework removed 19 topics, many of which FDOE cited as conflicting with Florida law, including discriminatory and historically fictional topics.”

3. The College Board Appears to Have Misrepresented the Revision Process for the APAAS Framework in Attempt to Deflect Criticism of the Revised Framework

Instead of defending APAAS or refusing to address FDOE concerns until the pilot course was fully revised and then releasing the new framework at the end of the school year on an appropriate schedule, the College Board released a new framework on the first day of Black History Month, inevitably leading most people to believe the organization had caved to Ron DeSantis at the worst moment imaginable. The College Board responded by recruiting Black scholars and employees to appear in public and deny that political pressure had any impact on the revisions. They repeatedly cited time-stamped revisions from December 22, and on a webinar hosted by Trevor Packer on Feb 7, Packer sat by as Duke political science professor Kerry Haynie said, about the people who accused the College Board of caving, “They would have us believe that comments made in January of 2023 influenced what happened in 2022.” Packer of course knew that the January 2023 letter was far from the first time that FDOE has expressed concerns about intersectionality and other topics that were removed from the

tested content of APAAS. Did Professor Haynie know this? [One of the great tragedies of the past week has been that the scholars who helped build this course should have been out in public celebrating it. Instead, David Coleman had them defending not even the course but the College Board and its processes.](#) On February 8, the conservative news site *Daily Caller* published a letter that FDOE sent to the College Board on February 7, 2023. The letter requests further review of the materials included in the optional section of the course, but it also contains a timeline of interactions with the College Board about APAAS. The letter claims that the FDOE first depressed concerns about APAAS violating state law on July 1, 2022, or 174 days before the final revisions to the framework were made on December 22, as the College Board and its representatives have claimed. It appears that at best the College Board was disingenuous about the timing of the FDOE complaints and the final revision to the framework. This is as serious an offense as the failure to defend the course and the revisions made to it. When you put the three together with David Coleman's history, how can he possibly remain CEO? It is one thing to have a CEO who cannot be trusted to stand up to criticism; it is another much worse thing to have a CEO who cannot be trusted.

4. [David Coleman's and the AP Program's decision to place some controversial texts in AP Classroom rather than fight for them has placed the entire AP program at risk.](#)

The FDOE letter of February 7, 2023, refers directly to an appearance by David Coleman on NPR in which he declared that authors like Kimberlé Crenshaw had not been purged from the course but has instead been "lifted up" by having their full texts made available for free in AP Classroom. FDOE is now demanding the full list of authors in AP Classroom. How long before Florida and other states demand a full accounting of the AP Classroom texts for every course? [Once again, Mr. Coleman's attempt to have his cake and eat it too, i.e., taking intersectionality out of the main APAAS course while claiming to "lift it up," has backfired.](#) These are the mistakes he and AP leadership repeatedly make that put not just APAAS but the whole future of the AP Program at risk.

*Here again we see the pattern that should now be familiar: David Coleman uses rhetoric that claims to support Black people when the College Board is trying to sell a new product, but when that product comes under attack from the Right, he caves. When the Left criticizes him, however, he obfuscates. Consider the irony that APAAS was introduced in the wake of the national Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that erupted after the murder of George Floyd, only to end in the removal of BLM from the required topics in the class and its relegation to an optional 3-week project that occurs after the AP exam. Will this material be on the AP AAS exam? It appears that the answer is no. Intersectionality, prison reform*

*and the new Jim Crow, reparations, and queer Black people all appear to have been removed from the material that could appear on the exam, which means that teachers will not just lose the incentive to teach it; they will be motivated not to teach it, since it will take away time from tested topics. How motivated will students be to take and teachers to teach a course that feels compromised and watered down? How can David Coleman regain all the trust the College Board has lost when he is the primary reason for that loss? Even the College Board's post on February 11, finally denouncing FDOE's description of APAAS, is just more evidence for the removal of David Coleman. As is typical, Mr. Coleman seems to act only when criticized, as he was in a USA Today piece on February 10, and as per usual he overreacted, with a long screed against FDOE that is sure to provoke reprisal. The whole post not only came too late but also seemed to exist just to try and clear the College Board's name. It failed. The only way to begin restoring some faith in the College Board is with a change in leadership.*

David Coleman's disregard for people of color once they are no longer helpful in the selling of products is not surprising from a man who once told an audience that the problem with personal writing is that "as you grow up in this world, you realize people really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think."

It is time for the Board of Trustees to give a shit and terminate David Coleman.

While the Board of Trustees must focus on finding the strongest replacement for Mr. Coleman and someone who can begin the process of regaining the trust of students and families, it would behoove the Board to consider any of the many women of color who, unlike the past two leaders of the College Board, come from the world of higher education and who will not only be more sensitive to and understanding of students of color but will also show a stronger commitment to them and to all students and to education.