



A Closer Look at Secondary Social Studies Content Preparation

Graduate and Alternative Route Secondary Programs

KEY FINDINGS: Only 44 percent of graduate programs have guardrails in place to ensure teacher candidates are prepared in all of the social studies subjects they will be certified to teach. Alternative route programs, lacking the ability to provide courses to remediate content knowledge gaps, struggle even more in this area, with only 25 percent ensuring aspiring teachers have adequate preparation.

It appears that post-baccalaureate certification routes — be they graduate or alternative route — have more difficulty serving the content needs of secondary social studies teachers compared to undergraduate programs, for which 57 percent of programs meet this standard.

Why teacher prep programs need strong content requirements for secondary social studies certifications

In the latter half of the 20th century there was considerable debate over secondary teachers' need to earn a certification area major over and above their teacher preparation coursework. That debate officially ended in 2001 when that requirement was embedded in ESEA's reauthorization. Since that time, even though ESEA no longer makes a content major a requirement, no state has backpedaled, with all essentially requiring secondary teachers to complete an academic major or at least pass a licensing test of content knowledge.¹ These tests are particularly important to graduate and alternative route programs which do not typically build in room for subject matter coursework. However, not all licensing tests can deliver. With only a few exceptions, the tests that determine if someone qualifies for general social studies certification fail to separately measure content knowledge in each of the individual social studies subjects.

Methodology

States offer one or more certifications in social studies. Each certification defines what subjects a teacher can teach. For example, a certification in history allows a teacher to teach history courses, while a general social studies certification allows a teacher to teach all social studies courses including economics, geography, history, political science, and psychology. In turn, teacher preparation programs offer *certification routes* — paths to specific certifications — that lead to some or all of the available certifications in the state.²

In the 47 states and the District of Columbia where there is a general social studies certification, we look for one of the following requirements:

- The candidate has completed or will complete as part of the program 15 semester credit hours (SCH) of coursework in history — the most common subject social studies teachers will teach — along with an additional 15 SCH in one of economics, geography, political science, or psychology; or

1 States set different credit threshold for academic majors. In many cases, the threshold is set below 30 semester credit hours, what institutions commonly define as the coursework required to complete a major.

2 In some cases, graduate programs offer a single route that allows teacher candidates to choose between two or more certifications. For example, a program may offer a "social studies education" route that allows candidates to choose between certifications in history, political science, general social studies, etc.

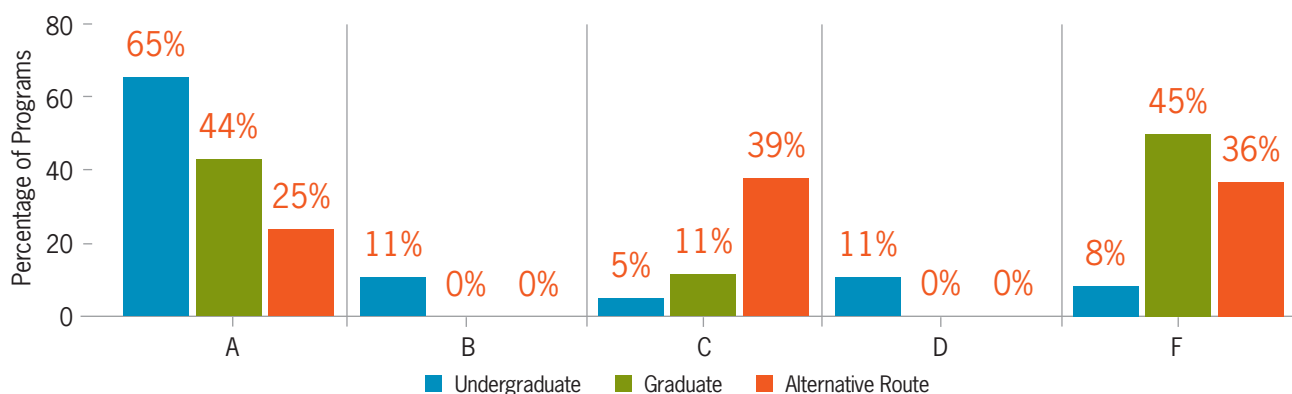
- The candidate has completed or will complete as part of the program 30 SCH of coursework in history;³ or
- The candidate has completed or will complete as part of the program 50 SCH of coursework across the social studies; or
- The candidate will complete 15 SCH of graduate-level social studies coursework, including at least one history course; or
- The program requires the candidates to pass an adequate licensing test.

Unfortunately, the licensing tests most commonly used in these 47 states only yield a single score, not a score for each subject. This problem makes it possible for a teacher candidate to incorrectly answer most or all of the political science questions, for example, but still score well enough to pass the test and be assigned to teach political science. Only California, Minnesota, and Missouri offer licensing tests that require candidates to pass independent sub-tests.

This is the first edition of the *Teacher Prep Review* to break out analysis of social studies preparation as its own standard. Previously, analysis of secondary social studies certification routes was completed under the High School Content standard. We made this change to report with more detail on the complexity both programs and states face when a general social studies certification is offered.

How many programs ensure that secondary social studies teacher candidates know the content they will be certified to teach?

(N=667 undergraduate secondary programs; N=300 graduate; N=102 alternative route)



Program grades represent the average of the lowest scoring single-subject route and the lowest scoring multiple-subject route. If each single-subject certification route were to earn an A and the general social studies route received an F, the resulting program grade under this standard would be a C.

This graph shows that 44 percent of graduate programs earn an A under this standard, which falls 21 percentage points below undergraduate programs. The gap between undergraduate and graduate programs is striking, but not surprising. Undergraduate programs, which have four years to do what graduate programs do in one or two years, typically dictate which content courses must be completed in order to be recommended for certification.

Alternative route programs are subject to the many of the same constraints as graduate programs. Additionally, alternative route programs not affiliated with a higher education institution lack the ability to offer remediation where knowledge gaps exist. On a positive note, due to when alternate route candidates become the teacher of record (the teacher responsible for a classroom), programs typically require candidates to pass state licensing tests as a condition of program admission; however, this is still not a sufficient screen in states with inadequate licensing tests. Because so few alternative route programs offer coursework that can make up for inadequate licensing tests, only 25 percent earn an A.

³ History receives special consideration because it is the subject teachers are most likely to teach with general social studies certification. A review of high school graduation requirements in the 50 states and the District of Columbia found that states require an average of three years of social studies. Where state requirements identify course topics, history is most often required for two of those three years.

A closer look at undergraduate social studies content preparation

Where teacher candidates pursue a narrow certification in a single subject such as history, we employ a straightforward rubric. We look for the requirement of at least 30 SCH of certification-specific coursework; 15 SCH of graduate-level certification-specific coursework; or an adequate licensing test. As the vast majority of states employ adequate licensing tests for these certifications, almost all single-subject certification routes satisfy this standard. In the states that require either inadequate licensing tests or no tests at all, six of twelve programs fall short because they do not require at least 30 SCH in the subject.⁴

The rubric used to analyze general social studies certification routes is more involved and is summarized with program results below.

Analysis of graduate programs offering general social studies certification

(N=267 programs)

| Grade | Criteria | Programs | |
|-------|--|----------|---------------|
| A | At least 15 SCH of coursework is required in history and at least 15 SCH is required in either economics, geography, political science, or psychology - or - At least 30 SCH of coursework is required in history - or - At least 50 SCH of coursework is required across the social studies - or - At least 15 SCH of graduate-level certification-specific coursework is required, including at least one history course | 21% | Total: 38% |
| | Adequate general social studies licensing test is required | 17% | |
| C | At least 42 SCH of coursework is required across the social studies - or - At least 15 SCH of graduate-level certification-specific coursework is required, without including at least on history course | 6% | |
| F | Failure to satisfy any of the above criteria | 56% | |

The 56 percent of graduate programs earning an F vastly exceeds the 13 percent of undergraduate programs earning an F as reported by NCTQ in 2017. This is due primarily to graduate programs requiring no more than a major in any one social studies field in pursuit of general social studies certification.

A closer look at alternative route social studies content preparation

While the majority of states offering single-subject certifications require adequate licensing tests, alternative route programs receive credit for that requirement only if candidates pass the tests before they become the teacher of record. Among the 57 alternative route programs offering single-subject social studies certifications, 93 percent satisfy the standard through the requirement of a licensing test or transcript review as a condition of program admission.

With the deficiencies of general social studies certification licensing tests previously noted, alternative route programs outside of California, Minnesota, and Missouri must independently require tests with separate cut scores or administer a transcript review to satisfy this standard. Programs offering general social studies certification are graded using the criteria detailed in the table below. As can be seen, only 15 percent of alternative route programs ensure general social studies candidates have adequate content knowledge.

4 These twelve programs are located in Alaska, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Utah, and Wisconsin. Information about the adequacy of licensing test requirements for every state can be found [here](#).

Analysis of alternative route programs offering general social studies certification

(N=93 programs)

| Grade | Criteria | Programs |
|-------|--|----------|
| A | At least 15 SCH of coursework is required in history and at least 15 SCH is required in either economics, geography, political science, or psychology - or - At least 30 SCH of coursework is required in history - or - At least 50 SCH of coursework is required across the social studies - or - Adequate general social studies licensing test is required | 15% |
| F | Failure to satisfy any of the above criteria | 85% |



National Council on Teacher Quality

1120 G Street, NW, Suite 800

Washington, D.C. 20005

Tel: 202 393-0020 Fax: 202 393-0095

Web: www.nctq.org