

IS THERE AN ADVANCED PLACEMENT ADVANTAGE?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines potential advantages that exist for schools and for students through the offering of Advanced Placement courses. Current research was reviewed and information was synthesized in the areas of: Effects of AP courses on students, AP implications for college admission, AP economic implications, and Concerns about AP programs. Results indicated that advantages exist for students and for schools participating in the AP program that go beyond college admissions factors and that, despite concerns, the numbers of schools and students participating in this program are increasing dramatically.

Confronted with increasing academic accountability and decreasing financial resources, the feasibility of offering Advance Placement (AP) courses is under scrutiny by school systems across the country. The purpose of this article is to examine whether or not there is an advantage for students and schools participating in the AP program.

HISTORY OF THE AP PROGRAM

The AP Program began in the 1950s with two projects financed by the Fund for the Advancement of Education of the Ford Foundation. The first project undertaken by John Kemper, headmaster of Andover Academy, addressed the problem of academically able students

repeating courses they had in high school during their introductory courses in college. A committee of college and high school teachers recommended that achievement examinations be set up in major subjects to enable students to obtain college credit while still in high school (Kreider, 1979).

The second project, the Kenyon Plan, brought together high school teachers, university professors, and representatives from the Educational Testing Service, who developed high school course outlines, syllabi, and tests based on the outlines, which were first administered to students in 1954. In 1955, the College Board took over the program, and it became known as the Advanced Placement Program. The first examinations under the College Board took place in 1956. (Kreider).

The driving ideas behind the program were that many high school students were capable of college-level work, and many high schools had the desire and resources to offer college level courses. The course syllabi and high course standards were the keys to the success of the program. They were meant to provide a framework for the course, a standard for achievement, a basis for testing, and a reference for colleges (Kreider).

In 1955, 1229 students took AP exams and results were sent to a few dozen colleges (Alpern, 1984). In 2000, 845,000 students took AP exams in 19 subject areas (College Board, 2000 AP National Summary Report Tables). Over one-half of all U.S. high schools now offer AP courses (Lord, 2000).

EFFECTS OF AP COURSES ON STUDENTS

AP courses appear to affect even those students enrolled in regular courses. Some research has shown that students taking no AP classes, from high schools with extensive AP programs, did better in college than would normally have been predicted from their grades and test scores (Willingham and Morris, 1986). Others would say that while benefiting the advanced student, any type of grouping program such as AP is not beneficial to the school community as a whole, because general and lower ability groups do not benefit (Cocking, 1990; Gamoran, 1992). One study reports this disparity to be so great that after 10th grade the track or group a student was in during high school was actually more important for achievement success than

whether or not the student was even attending school (Gamoran). Cocking says in her research on groups, that it is undemocratic not to offer different educational opportunities to fit children's different needs. In her study involving 290 history students, she found that grouping inevitably benefited the higher level groups, and that they and their teachers were usually enthusiastic about ability grouping. She quotes Thomas Jefferson in saying: "There is nothing more unequal than equal treatment of unequal people." Other researchers concur that there are times when high ability students should have a chance to work and compete solely with one another (Johnson and Johnson, 1992).

When AP students were asked their reasons for enrolling in AP courses, their answers varied from: escaping the "chaos" to having "all the best teachers" to being considered a "serious student" (Casserly). In a survey of 100 AP students at 9 colleges, very few mentioned social exclusivity as a factor and few had anything negative to say about participation in the program (Casserly). At a California high school where 21 AP courses are offered, students say that "AP and honors classes make a difference in how prepared they feel for college" (Hebel, p. 3). A Biloxi Mississippi sophomore says that "AP courses allow students to gain more knowledge prior to attending college"(Lee, p. 1).

The perception of having the best teachers for AP classes may be a valid one. In a survey of history teachers done in 1989-1990 by the National Center for History in the Schools at U.C.L.A., backgrounds of teachers of general, remedial, and AP history were examined. Sixty percent of those teaching general and remedial U.S. History and World History did not have a major in history (Thomas, 1991). The survey found that AP history teachers were more likely to have majored in history and were more likely to hold Master's degrees in history. In addition, AP teachers, in general, were found to be more prepared and have higher goals for their students. Teachers say they are more enthusiastic about teaching AP classes, and spend more time preparing for them (Gamoran). "If you look at a high school master schedule, you'll find the very best educated teachers are teaching AP..." says Dr. Kati Hancock, Director of The Education Trust (Burdman, 2000, p. 3).

Even for those outside of the field of education, AP plays a signifi-

cant role in assessing school quality. The nation's top 100 public high schools, listed in a March 2001 issue of Newsweek, were ranked "based on the number of AP or International Baccalaureate exams" students take (Russo, 2000, p. 2).

AP IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE ADMISSION

Besides more challenging classes and better teachers, an obvious reason to take AP classes is the college factor--admission to college, or testing out of college courses. A transcript with AP courses on it strengthens the chances for college admission (Casserly; Willingham and Morris; Dillon, 1986; Lawrence, 1996; Lord; Hebel, 1999). Many colleges, such as Michigan and Berkeley, award extra points for AP courses taken (Lord; Hebel) and in fact some colleges "penalize students" who could have taken AP courses, but chose not to do so (Lawrence). Students are very much aware of the potential admissions consideration. "Pretty much the reason I'm taking them is to benefit my changes for getting in" to college, states one high school senior taking two AP courses (Hebel, p. 5).

In fact, the AP factor in college admissions prompted two lawsuits in California in 1999. These lawsuits contended that minority and low income students were being denied equal consideration in admissions because of the fact that many high schools either do not offer AP courses, or that students cannot afford to take the AP exams (Hebel). Stanford Dean of Admissions, Robert Kinnally, disputes the allegation that students are penalized for not taking AP courses and that transcripts are evaluated according to what courses are available in the schools from which the students are applying (Lord, 1999). This may be the case; however, the U.S. Department of Education provided \$3 million in grants in 1998 to pay the exam fees for economically disadvantaged students enrolled in AP courses (Curry, MacDonald, & Morgan, 1999) and increased that amount to \$15 million in 2000 (Promotion of advanced placement, 2000).

In California, the 1999 lawsuits resulted in appropriations of \$30 million by the California legislature to expand a program to put AP courses on-line and to provide the financial base for establishing or enlarging AP courses in disadvantaged school districts (Burdman, 1999). Some states require public high schools to offer a certain number of AP courses, and some states provide funds to pay test fees, train

teachers, and further encourage the development of AP courses (Hebel, 1999).

More high schools are adopting AP programs, and the College Board is continually expanding the number of AP courses available. Juniors and seniors were the primary participants of the first AP courses, but now 9th and 10th graders are being incorporated as well. Two interesting observations have been made on the lower-grade AP courses. One study revealed that the highest confidence levels and academic self-perception occurred in sophomore girls (Prescott, 1988), and another found that the average AP examination grade of younger AP participants is higher than it is for older participants in the same subjects (Casserly; Alpern). An explanation for this might be that sophomores generally do not carry schedules as challenging overall as do upperclassmen, or perhaps they have more time to devote to the AP course, or (Alpern, 1999) suggests that "senioritis" is not a problem.

Although the AP courses terminate in national exams in May of each year, information from colleges consistently revealed that it was not the AP exam grade that was important to them, but the course itself. Although the format of the course is up to the individual schools, there are informal standards that supposedly underlie the courses. The College Board supplies course guidelines, organizes conferences and workshops, publishes sample exams and syllabi, allows teachers to have essay portions of their exams returned, analyzes each component of the exam by student, and regularly reviews exams and course offerings (Lawrence; Casserly; Morris and Willingham; Prescott). Of major significance to colleges are the skills taught and the structure of the courses (Henry, 1990; Prescott). "It's like an academic green light to assume that a certain level of preparation has been achieved," according to a Sweet Briar College admissions director (Lawrence, 1996, p. 2). As well, college faculty have a great deal of input into the AP course descriptions, examinations, and standards (College Board, 2001).

AP IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

Not only is college admission an advantage of having taken AP courses, but finishing college seems to be as well. Rigorous high school courses better prepare students for college work, and drop out rates

are lower among AP students (Lord). Studies done at Yale, Duke, and Michigan revealed AP students were not only a superior group prior to college entry, but had a better overall four year college performance (Morris and Willingham). Building on these studies, Morris and Willingham conducted a study among freshmen at nine colleges who had submitted at least one AP grade. This group of 1,115 students was observed over four years. Conclusions were that AP students were found to have better academic records than non-AP students, and to be more successful overall in everything but athletics and student elected offices, results also borne out in the Yale and Duke studies. Other research has gone even further to conclude that AP students do as well or better in subsequent advanced courses than do students who take their introductory courses in college (Casserly; College Board, 2001; Burdman). Additionally, students who take a more rigorous curriculum are more likely to finish college (Lord; Viadero, 2000; Mathews, 2001). In one study, the college drop-out rate for AP students over four years was significantly lower, 15% as compared with 25% for non-AP students (Willingham and Morris).

Research indicates that students who submitted AP scores to colleges were very likely to continue with courses in those fields. AP men tended to favor the natural sciences both in the AP courses and as college majors, and AP women, the humanities in both (Willingham and Morris). Some research has indicated that students tended to major in the area for which they submitted an AP grade (Willingham and Morris), but other research refutes this, citing the facts that most students take more than one AP test, and also, that two very popular majors, business and engineering, are not represented by AP courses (Casserly). One study reports a significant difference in college majors chosen by AP and non-AP students, concluding that AP students choose more challenging majors, including more students majoring in the natural sciences, than do non-AP students (Willingham and Morris).

AP ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

The AP college factor is not only an academic one, but an economic one as well. Over one-half of the freshmen at Stanford University have at least 10 college credits when they enter college and students are allowed to obtain a year's worth of credits through high school

classes. With tuition at Stanford at \$23,058 per year in 2000 (Office of Budget and Financial Planning, 2001), credit earned through AP or IB classes could amount to a tremendous dollar savings since one \$77 AP exam can translate into three hours of college credit. In some Dallas, Texas public schools, the financial rewards can come before college. Students taking AP tests in math, science, and English are paid \$100 for each test for which they receive passing scores, and their schools benefit financially as well (Teicher, 2000). The number of student receiving passing scores has increased substantially each year since the first year of the financial rewards program in 1995-1996 (Teicher).

CONCERNS ABOUT AP PROGRAMS

Although studies would seem to paint a rosy picture of AP courses, the subject is certainly not without its problems. Because high schools and college admissions departments are encouraging AP enrollment, students often enroll in AP courses not because they value the subject, but because they want AP on their transcripts (Cocking). Conversely, top students facing GPA and college admissions pressure often do not enroll in courses they may want to take for their own special interests because they are not offered as AP courses (Dillion). Many students feel that attending schools where AP courses are not offered handicaps them in terms of college admissions (Cocking). In a 1999 lawsuit filed in the state of California against UC Berkley, lawyers representing civil rights groups said that "minority students are at a disadvantage in the [college] admissions process because many schools with high minority populations do not provide AP courses" (Ahmad, 1999, p. 2) Only about one-half of American high schools include AP classes in their curricula and the majority offer at most 5 of the 33 possible subjects (Mendels, 1999). A second 1999 lawsuit also filed in California against the state of California and a Los Angeles county school district claims that students' constitutional rights were violated "by not offering AP courses equally across the state and thereby harming some students who apply to college" (Hebel, p. 2).

Just because a course is labeled as AP does not mean that it automatically measures up to certain standards. Many decisions about courses are made in the local school and classroom. Knowing that AP

courses benefit a student in the area of college admissions, some schools offer classes that are AP in name only. Teachers do not receive any AP training nor is there any expectation that students will take AP exams. Part of the reason for the disparity among schools is that no criteria have to be met, or permission granted in order for a class to carry an AP title. Addressing this situation, Wade Curry, head of the AP program at the College Board says he does not favor AP teacher certification, but is concerned about the need to "ensure quality teaching" (Lawrence, p. 2).

Obviously, not all students in AP courses deserve the admissions' preference that exists. Additionally, just because a student takes an AP class does not mean the student will obtain a score on the exam that earns him college credit. In Lee County, Florida, only one-half of the students who took AP exams scored well enough to receive college credit (Vick, 1998). Retired Yale University Professor, William Lichten, published research in June 2000 that suggests that the numbers are even lower nationally. He claims that just under half, (49 %,) may actually get credit for passing grades on the exams (Ganeshanathan, 2000; Curry, MacDonald, & Morgan; Viadero, 2000). This conflicts with the College Board's claims that two-thirds of students taking AP exams score high enough to qualify for college credit. Lichten points to the College Board's use of a 3 as an indicator of college credit, when in fact, many competitive schools require a 4 (Curry, MacDonald, & Morgan; Viadero; Ganeshanathan, 2000). Looking at the percentage of students in AP classes that take the AP exams and receive passing scores currently seems to be the primary way of gauging the effectiveness of a school's AP program.

Block scheduling has also proven to be a hindrance to students wanting to take and taking AP classes for several reasons. In data collected in 1995-1996, students who took year long courses outscored those who took semester block classes in 77% of the tests (AP Notations of Block Scheduling, 1996). Part of this scoring discrepancy may be due to the fact that national AP exams are given in May of each year. Students who take an AP class during the fall semester block have many months prior to the AP exam without any classes in that subject. Also, instructional time for AP classes is reduced on a block schedule both in the amount of time available weekly for the class as opposed to a year long schedule and because the test is given

in mid May, instructional time is reduced still further as the exam may be given several weeks before the end of the school year (Hansen, Gutman, & Smith). Those students who want to take AP classes in a block schedule can find difficulty in scheduling these classes since students can usually take only 4 classes at a time under the block (Hansen, Gutman, & Smith, 2000). Some schools on block schedules have tried to compensate for these problems by offering AP classes all year on an every other day schedule or by splitting a block and offering two AP classes in that time slot for the entire year.

Even though the College Board is increasing the number of AP courses and the numbers of schools offering AP courses are increasing, some very competitive schools are dropping or reducing their AP programs. Northeastern prep schools such as Fieldston, Brearley, and Phillips Exeter offer no AP courses (Russo). "They [AP classes] emphasize breadth over depth and they're content driven rather than focusing on developing skills like critical inquiry, discourse, ways of approaching texts." commented Fieldston's principal when discussing reasons for dropping their AP courses (Russo, pp. 1-2).

In an effort to rectify the inequalities that exist because of funding, several programs have been established. In 2000, the University of California College Preparatory Initiative began offering online AP classes to schools unable to offer AP courses (Distance Learning for Advanced Placement, 2000). Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee have teamed with the Southern Regional Education Board to create a federally funded program called "AP Nexis Online" that offers access to AP courses to low income, academically able students (SREB Educational Technology Cooperative). Indiana Academy, a program for gifted students located at Ball State University, provides five AP courses to schools that do not offer AP classes (Mendels, 1999). However, these online AP courses, aimed at filling some of the academic gaps are getting "mixed reviews" (Mayfield, 2000, p. 1). In California, at Balboa High School, one student out of the 15 who originally signed up for the online course took the AP test at the end. The school has decided not to continue its participation in the online program (Mayfield). Seeking federal funding for teacher training and exam costs, partnering with other schools to share teachers, participating in online, satellite or CD offered AP classes are all ways that schools can establish or expand AP classes. Allowing students to take courses at

community colleges or universities is a way for a high school to extend its course offerings without absorbing additional cost. The University of California awards the same bonus points for the transcript of a student who has taken college courses during high school as it does for a student with high school AP classes (Hebel).

CONCLUSION

Judging from the increasing numbers of students taking AP courses, a perception definitely exists that there is an AP advantage. Research information would seem to support AP advantages for students, teachers, schools and universities. Students benefit from high caliber and motivated teachers, can receive college credit for high school courses, and are better prepared for attending college. They pursue more challenging majors and are more likely to graduate from college. Students can save college tuition money with successful scores on AP exams and are not wasting time and money retaking a course they have already mastered.

Teachers are more enthusiastic about preparing for AP courses. There are very specific guidelines and training available to help in teaching the courses. In some schools, such as those in Dallas, teachers benefit financially from their students' scores.

Schools benefit from the recognition that comes from offering AP courses and having students successfully obtain credit on AP exams. Schools offering AP courses may attract more motivated teachers and students. College acceptance rates may also be higher for those schools that offer AP courses.

Colleges benefit from receiving students who are better prepared to complete college classes successfully and may receive more motivated and skilled students. Financially, colleges benefit because students who have had AP courses are more likely to graduate and more likely to seek higher degrees.

Despite what problems may exist with the program, it would appear that AP courses provide significant advantages and that allocating resources for this program is certainly an expenditure that pays off both academically and economically for all involved.

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