



Powered by Clickability

Advanced Placement: A detour for college fast track?

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

Admissions officials at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, like those at most colleges nationwide, like to see Advanced Placement courses on high school transcripts. And like many colleges, they typically exempt students who have passed AP exams from taking certain introductory courses.

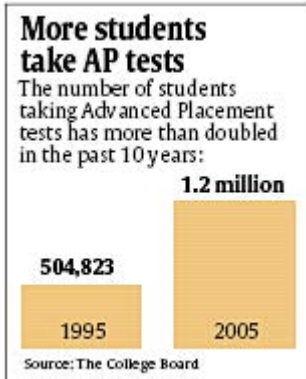


"Our hope (is that AP) can serve as an anchor for increasing rigor in our schools," says Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board.

AP photo

But in recent years, a troubling pattern has emerged. Increasingly, admitted students who boast AP credits "really weren't in many ways ready for the rigor of our college curriculum," says Edith Waldstein, vice president for enrollment management.

A committee is looking into whether to readjust the way Wartburg awards AP credit. "It just doesn't mean as much as it used to," she says.



Advanced Placement, a program that allows high school students to take college-level courses, has been on a roll. Last year, more than 1.2 million students took more than 2.1 million exams, double the number 11 years ago.

The percentage of students who took and passed AP courses increased in every state and the District of Columbia since 2000. Nearly every state has an incentive program to encourage more schools to offer the courses.

President Bush further boosted the program's visibility during his State of the Union address when he announced a plan to train more teachers to teach Advanced Placement and similarly rigorous math and science courses.

One reason for AP's explosive growth is an expansion of mission. Created 51 years ago to give the brightest high school students a head start on college coursework, AP increasingly is being promoted, as Bush's proposal suggests, as a tool for high school reform. (**Related story:** [An 'arms race' among students](#))

"Our hope (is that AP) can serve as an anchor for increasing rigor in our schools and reducing the achievement gap," says Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, the non-profit group that runs the AP program.

But as AP grows in popularity, it seems to be experiencing growing pains. More doubts are being raised about

whether AP can accomplish all that it is being asked to do.

Like Wartburg, a number of colleges are re-evaluating whether to exempt students with AP credit from certain classes. Already, several highly selective schools, including Harvard, Yale and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, require many students to take introductory courses in certain subjects, even if they passed an AP exam in the same subject.

Beginning this fall, entering students at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia no longer will be able to use AP credits alone to satisfy general education requirements.

And the University of Georgia in Athens is reviewing AP policies after a task force report raised concerns that too many entering students are placing out of core classes "without either undergoing the rigorous assessment of or acquiring the skills taught at a research university."

Uncertain predictor of success

In terms of admissions, research on whether AP involvement can predict a student's success in college appear inconclusive at best. State-based studies by the National Center for Educational Accountability in Texas and the University of California-Berkeley, to name two, show that students who pass AP exams are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who don't pass.

Even so, the California study also found that taking AP (and honors) courses bore "little or no relationship to students' later performance in college" and suggested that institutions reconsider the use of AP as an admissions criterion.

Meanwhile, in a just-released update of a 1999 Education Department study showing that the "academic intensity of the curriculum" is a predictor of bachelor's degree completion, researcher Clifford Adelman found that, by itself, AP coursework did not "reach the threshold of significance."

And in a not-yet-published study of 465 college students nationwide who had taken both an AP science exam and the corresponding introductory science course, researchers at Harvard and the University of Virginia found that even an AP exam score of 5, the highest possible, was no guarantee of a college grade of A in the same course.

Needed: Greater consistency

Earlier warnings also have been sounded about course quality. A 2002 review by the National Research Council, part of the National Academy of Sciences, found that AP science courses lacked depth. A year earlier, a panel of experts created by the College Board urged it to take steps to control quality as the AP program expands.

In response, the College Board is now revising courses, beginning with biology and history, and is undertaking a massive audit of high school courses "to ensure a greater degree of consistency," says Trevor Packer, executive director of the program. Without some control, "the claims we can make for those students are limited."

The European International Baccalaureate, a more comprehensive college-level program that served 35,366 students in 423 U.S. high schools last year, also is held up as a model for rigor. But AP, which served 15,380 schools last year, is far more established.

And even critics agree there's a lot to like about the AP program, which to date offers a curriculum and exam for 35 (and counting) college-level courses in 20 subjects, including math, science, English and social sciences. Each course is developed by a committee of college and high school faculty and is designed to be the equivalent of an introductory college course.

The College Board offers training to AP teachers, many of whom also teach other courses and otherwise might have few professional development opportunities. And like SAT scores, AP grades offer colleges a national yardstick with which to compare students.

No longer the cream of the crop

The hallmark of the program is its exams, one for each course, offered worldwide each May. The exams typically consist of multiple-choice and free-response questions. Scores range from 1 to 5 with 3 or higher considered a passing grade. In some cases, students who pass an AP exam are exempted from taking the equivalent course in college and may be permitted to take higher-level courses.

But with AP increasingly being viewed as a standard to which all students should aspire, some researchers question whether the AP's embrace of a wider swath of students is creating fault lines.

"The traditional role of AP is still on very firm footing," says Kristin Klopfenstein, an economist at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, whose research suggests that average students don't necessarily benefit. "The AP fervor has been so coming over the last decade that we haven't slowed down enough to really look to see that AP accomplishes what it

At Fairfax (Va.) High School, which opened AP enrollment to all students in the early 1990s, the answer seems to be no. It does.

In the six years since the district began paying for all AP students to take AP exams, the school's average exam score edged upward even as the number of test takers has more than doubled, from 316 to 647. Average exam scores increased from 2.65 to 2.68.



Senior Joe Britt, 18, who is taking AP physics, English and calculus, says the courses are definitely more challenging than regular classes.

than regular classes. But, he says, "you try harder with AP classes."

Teachers, too, are committed to the concept. "I'm going to bring all of them up whether they have a good background or not. They need a lot of hand-holding," says Fairfax High School biology teacher Malcolm Leinwohl.

But Leinwohl, who works in one of the nation's most affluent counties, knows his students are lucky that the school system runs an extensive training program for teachers. While 40% of high schools offer no AP courses, Fairfax offers 20 of the available.

Students have both time and space for lab work, he says and the school system runs an extensive AP training for teachers.

Not all students have that kind of support; College Board studies show 800,000 students nationwide this year demonstrate a strong statistical likelihood to do well in AP biology, yet only 100,000 seats are available.

Debate continues over whether that is the best use of resources.

"Generally speaking, AP courses have more rigor than regular courses, so you're raising the rigor and the challenge of the high school curriculum," says Tom Luce, Department of Education assistant secretary.

Focus on education, not a test

Counters Michael Kirst, a Stanford University professor of education, "We ought to work on (improving) the existing curriculum, not on funneling people into AP who aren't ready for it."

But the more AP becomes a tool to improve high school rigor, the less impressed college faculty seem to be with the credential.

"There is something about a good undergraduate general education that can't be easily replicated by a terrific high school course," says Bruce Johnstone, higher education professor at the University at Buffalo and former chair of the College Board trustees.

Even some students agree. "Even though the AP test provides some sort of standard, it doesn't necessarily ensure that students got a great perspective on these subjects," says MIT senior Christopher Suarez, 22. He says some AP courses prepared him for MIT but not all. "The focus is on the test and not necessarily on the fundamental knowledge of the material."

▪ [REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2006-03-20-ap-main_x.htm

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

