

AP: A Critical Examination

- AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program.
- Edited by Philip M. Sadler, Gerhard Sonnert, Robert H. Tai, and Kristin Klopfenstein.
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And In Conclusion

- This edited book contains chapters by seventeen authors who use the latest research to explain what the AP program is all about: How are courses different, validation of exam scores, participation and its correlation with success, impact on college admission, and its possible future.
- The final chapter focuses on key findings. For some, this might be a good place to start. It also makes a good starting point for conversations with students and parents. Every high school principal, guidance counsellor, and college admissions department should have a copy of this book.

Key Findings

- Involvement in AP courses does not appear to bestow global benefits on participating students beyond the habits and motivations that students already have on enrolling. Those looking for a panacea for what ails American education had best look elsewhere. The quality of AP courses differs tremendously by high school and even by teacher. AP exam scores do not usually play a role in college admission. AP-taking students benefit from weighted GPA's and earning top honors for graduation. Students who pass an AP exam enjoy significantly better performance in that subject in college. AP credit rarely shortens time to graduation.

Key Findings II

- For students, AP courses offer an opportunity to study a subject in a more rigorous and demanding fashion. They will probably be in classes with fewer students and classmates will likely have stronger backgrounds. There should be fewer discipline issues and the teachers should have strong subject matter backgrounds and excellent teaching skills. Students should be prepared to work hard and put in more time than other courses. The best measure of success is passing the AP test. Taking the most demanding courses the school offers increases one's chances of getting in to first-choice colleges.

Key Findings III

- There appears to be little benefit for students who take and fail AP exams. AP appears to offer an advantage only to students who perform well on the AP exam. Failure indicates that the students are unprepared or not up to the challenge, or that the course does not have a proficient teacher or is lacking in resources. Courses in which few students take or pass the exam are generally not effective. Those who do pass AP exams will generally earn higher GPA's in college and graduate on time. While many students can skip intro courses with strong AP scores, many find retaking intro courses rewarding and interesting.

Key Findings IV

- Government support should require exams for all and monitor student success by classroom. Absent high passing rates, resources should be used to improve the AP course or reallocated to help students avoid remedial college courses and provide opportunities for well-prepared students to take courses at local colleges. Advanced coursework of any kind is a terrific way to explore serious career interest while still in high school.

A Profitable Non Profit

- The College Board owns the program and is essentially a monopoly. With a 2009 exam fee of \$86, the AP generates a good deal of “excess”, which makes it seem more revenue driven than beholden to the idea of a liberal education. The president makes \$638,000 and senior staff average \$239,000. To some they seem like just another vendor selling tests. The author sees the program as having the potential of becoming a tragic morality tale about corporate-style revenue grabbing and the subversion of AP’s nonprofit ethos. There also appears to be no encouragement to change from any person or institution with any power. There is a concern that AP courses are often more about training for the tests than learning how to think.

A Study Of AP Teacher Practices

- A survey of 1000+ AP biology teacher in 2003 found that:
- Teachers spending less than 20% of their time the month before preparing for the exam obtained the best results. It seems they used the extra time to teach the material better in the first place.
- More stress teaching the scientific method produced better results.
- Classes where less than 50% took the AP exam performed worse than classes where 75%+ took the exam.
- Classes with teachers who had less than three years experience performed less well than did classes with more experience.
- Teachers found that the amount of material and demands of the exam prevented them from using project-based instruction or portfolios, and giving more detailed feedback.

Predicting College Success

- A study of 4,207 students focused on how high school courses in biology, chemistry, and physics impacted success in college.
- One cannot exclude the possibility that some other factor, like verbal performance or math ability, may be the cause of any better college performance of AP students, rather than the fact that they had taken an AP course. Math achievement appears to have a larger effect on college physics success than any course taken in high school. Students who pass the AP exam did better but only averaged in the B to B+ range. These students take a college intro course twice and yet as a group show no evidence of mastery. For high schools seeking to evaluate their AP courses, a preponderance of failing scores in biology and physics implies that the AP course offers little or no benefit. This is not the case with chemistry.

Persistence & Performance In College

- A large study at the university of Tennessee at Martin looked at how students who gained college credit for an AP course or other college work done in high school compared to those who did not. The AP/other-credit participants had greater persistence and better performance. They had 12% to 16% higher first-year persistence rates and 0.4 to 1.0 higher mean GPA. However, when differences in background variables such as family income, parents education, and high school performance were accounted for, the differences were not found to be significant. This is due to the fact that these students are already highly motivated and proficient.

Policy Issues

- Policy makers must realize that while there is a correlation between AP participation and college success, there is no evidence that the AP experience causes college success. Eleven states actually mandate that districts offer AP courses. Due to costs of AP, such mandates are largely unfunded. Success in AP is largely determined by prior academic experience. Just dropping AP courses into a school that lacks a rigorous academic pipeline and other resources is likely to lead to failure or superficial understanding. Money is best spent on improving preparation in earlier grades. Requiring AP can lead to unintended consequences. Check out the AVID program at <http://www.pac.dodea.edu/edservices/educationprograms/AVID.htm>.

Does AP Save Money?

- A very small group of students have access to a wide variety of quality AP courses and pass enough to gain sophomore status. Students who take courses at local colleges can do the same. Both groups are much more likely to graduate in 3, 4, or 5 years. The faster students graduate, the sooner they are paying taxes. It is in the public's interest, therefore, to promote timely degree completion. The expansion of AP courses to underserved populations started in the mid 1990's. Such expansion does not shorten time to degree due to the dismal performance of low income students on AP exams. Such programs fail to improve educational equity and can divert resources from proven programs. AP students who don't obtain sophomore status earn degrees in about the same time as students without AP experience. AP programs are more expensive than college credit programs where students pay tuition.

Should I Take AP?

- Properly taught AP courses are college-level courses. Students should be college ready on day one of an AP course in order to be adequately prepared for the course. In order to promote educational equity and college readiness of minority and disadvantages students, policy makers have sought to expand the AP program. As these courses expand to this population, teachers tend to adapt by adjusting the course content to the academic level of the students without creating systems needed to bring the students to the level implied in the course titles. As a result, course titles on the students' transcripts may bear little relationship to what those students actually learned. The majority of low-income, African American, and Hispanic students who completed college prep courses in Texas need remediation when they get to college. (61% African American, 59% Hispanic, 63% low income, 27% white, 33% not low income) Texas data was used as it allows for matching student level preK-12 and higher education data longitudinally.

College Board Issues

- In spite of the evidence against offering AP courses to students who are not prepared, the College Board continues to recruit. The error in reasoning is simple. How can you teach college level courses to a students who will need to take remedial courses in college? A graph on page 235 shows how tightly AP passing correlates with SAT scores. The key variable seems to be poverty rather than race. Another problem is that the College Board does not release aggregate information on the performance of schools, which is required for NCLB testing. The most important outcome of poor performance in many schools is to focus policy makers on the importance of prerequisites for success.

AP And College Admissions

- Students who take advanced courses usually receive bonus points toward their high school GPA, which increases their rank in class. The study discussed here looks only at AP science courses and concludes that this practice is valid. The authors encourage colleges to note that schools in lower socioeconomic status communities, rural schools, and small schools may not offer as many advanced coursework options. Hence, community socioeconomic status should be accounted for separately in the admissions process. Colleges should also offer support programs and adopt retention strategies for such these students.

What I Left Out

- In order to further promote sales of valuable books such as this one, I leave out some content. Here are some things you can access when you purchase the book.
- The history of the AP program includes thoughtful criticism. There are details of how AP science courses, students, and teachers, and teaching differ from regular and honors courses.
- There is a chapter on reliability and validity of AP tests. Studies find that both are high. Read it if you want to better understand these terms and see the data.
- If you are trying to fight against offering AP courses to underprepared students and for working on better preparation in earlier grades, you will find abundant and compelling evidence in this book. If you think AP courses can fix a school all by themselves, you need to consider the evidence presented here.