

**Recommendations for Maintaining the Quality of
Advanced Placement Programs***

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Abstract

The Advanced Placement (AP) Program allows students to take college-level courses while in high school. The program has been growing dramatically, but several emerging trends have the potential to compromise the College Board's mission of setting a national standard of excellence while expanding access to traditionally underrepresented students. Placing AP teachers out-of-field without support for professional development, applying narrow enrollment criteria for entering students, using AP exam scores for program assessment, and communication failures between teachers, parents, and administrators can diminish the effectiveness of an AP Program. This paper recommends ways to maintain AP program quality in light of these concerns.

Introduction

The Advanced Placement (AP) Program allows students to take college-level courses while in high school. The College Board generates a standardized curriculum for each subject area that is used to guide teachers as they prepare students for the national AP examinations each May. College and university admissions officers look favorably upon AP course experience, and most schools grant college credit to those students who earn passing scores on AP exams.

The AP Program is experiencing rapid growth due to the increasing competitiveness of college admissions and state-funded incentive programs. Nationwide, the number of students participating in the AP Program increased by 48 percent between 1998 and 2002 (College Board, n.d.a). While recent growth in the AP Program is exciting and promising, several emerging trends have the potential to compromise the College Board's mission of setting a national standard of excellence with equal access for students from all ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups (College Board, n.d.a).

This paper discusses how placing AP teachers out-of-field without adequate support for professional development, applying narrow enrollment criteria for students entering the program, using AP exam scores for program assessment, and communication failures between teachers, parents, and administrators about the unique demands of AP can diminish the effectiveness of a school's AP Program. I became aware of these trends through discussions with AP teachers as a faculty liaison at the Advanced Placement Summer Institute at Texas Christian University and as a grader for the AP Economics exam. In light of these concerns and the fact that schools are facing rapid increases in AP participation coupled with tight budgets, I recommend various ways for schools to maintain the quality of their Advanced Placement Programs.

Out-of-Field Teaching

As is often the case for teachers across the curriculum, many AP teachers do not have a college major or minor in the AP subject in which they teach.¹ Given the rigor of the material taught in AP classes, however, it is critical that AP teachers have a deep conceptual understanding of their subject. The College Board suggests that “AP teachers have considerable experience, and usually an advanced degree in the discipline, before undertaking an AP course” (n.d.c). However, local schools have complete autonomy in deciding who teaches AP, and as a result, new AP teachers frequently find themselves learning the material along with their students.

Composite certification is the primary reason for high rates of out-of field teaching. The composite certificate program allows teachers to instruct in a variety of subjects although the certification exam only tests proficiency in a subset of those areas. Many states use composite certificates in social studies and science to maintain flexibility in scheduling. Teachers become composite certified not only because it makes them more marketable, but also because it allows for the enhanced intellectual stimulation that comes with teaching a variety of subjects.

While highly motivated teachers should not be prevented from teaching an AP class outside their primary field, administrators should be extremely cautious about making such a match. If composite certified teachers are willing to take on the challenge of an AP course outside their primary field, substantial professional development should be expected and supported. AP teachers, regardless of their schooling and experience, should *want* to teach an AP class, be committed to continuing their own learning, and be willing to pursue ongoing professional development.

A wide variety of professional development opportunities are available for AP teachers. Many state incentive programs fund AP teacher training through week-long College Board-approved AP Summer Institutes. Summer Institutes provide an invaluable avenue for introducing new teachers to what is expected in AP, networking with other AP teachers, obtaining new ideas, and brushing up on skills. In addition, the College Board recently started the AP National Conference which provides several days of sessions and workshops for AP teachers in July. Ideally, however, professional development should extend beyond a few days in the summer. AP teachers should be provided with incentives to take college-level courses in the field in which they teach. The level of courses taken should be commensurate with a teacher's previous experience and should not be confined to the upper division or graduate level. New AP teachers in particular need to audit the college-level equivalent of their AP course, even if they took the course as a student.

While professional development requires substantial funding when it involves release time or tuition dollars (or personal sacrifice on the part of teachers when no funding is available), there are many inexpensive opportunities for professional development. Hundreds of AP teachers earn a stipend while making valuable contacts and supplementing content knowledge as graders of AP exams each year. AP teachers can also develop working relationships with members of the faculty at local universities or community colleges. Within the high school or district, AP teachers can talk to each other about course development and teaching strategies. Whenever possible, they should also be encouraged to observe each other's classes and provide constructive feedback.

Enrollment Criteria

The accelerated pace and rigorous college-level curriculum of AP classes are not appropriate for all students. Therefore, schools must inevitably decide which students to enroll in the program. There are some worrisome trends emerging in student selection practices. For example, some administrators express the desire to make AP participation mandatory for all students (Mathews, 2003). This approach is problematic in that inappropriately placing unfocused, unmotivated, or poorly prepared students in the AP Program demoralizes those students and necessitates a dilution of the curriculum for all students. At the other extreme, many schools use a single selection criteria such as PSAT scores or class rank that tends to limit the opportunities of highly motivated underprivileged students.²

AP classes should only be attempted by goal-oriented, motivated, and capable students. To identify such students and to maintain consistency with the College Board's commitment to expand the reach of the program beyond the upper- and middle- class white students it has traditionally served, schools should employ a wide array of selection criteria. Test scores, transcripts, teacher recommendations, and personal interviews can all be used to assure that students who enter the AP Program are both capable and highly motivated. Ultimately, however, the College Board believes schools should open their programs to any student willing to take on the AP challenge (College Board, n.d.b). If motivated students with relatively weak academic backgrounds are admitted into the program, they will need extra support outside of the classroom. This will allow teachers to maintain a rigorous curriculum during classroom hours.³ It is in time spent outside of class that struggling students can learn strategies for effective studying and habits of mind conducive to academic success. If struggling students are unwilling or unable to invest time outside of class, they should be transferred to a less demanding class.

Assessment

Given the rapid growth of the AP Program, administrators are understandably concerned about monitoring the quality of their AP Programs. Currently, the primary method of assessing AP Program quality is through AP exam scores and participation rates (Santoli, 2002). However, the College Board specifically states: “AP examinations are not designed as instruments for teacher or school evaluation or comparison... Where evaluation of AP students, teachers, or courses is desired, local evaluation models should be developed” (College Board, 2002, 11). Despite the cautions of the College Board, state officials in Texas began to consider student AP course-taking behavior and exam scores in its yearly school ratings in 2002 (Texas Education Agency, 2002a).

AP exam scores alone provide a poor measure of overall AP Program quality. Scoring of the AP exams is calibrated based on the performance of a national group of students, but many schools are responsible for educating students whose pre-AP curriculum leaves them at a decided disadvantage relative to the national group. Hispanic, Black, and low-income students tend to arrive in AP classes with less academic preparation and less developed study skills than middle-class white students, and a high score on the AP exam is not the only indication that high-level learning has occurred. “The most important criterion in assessing the quality of Advanced Placement... programs is whether or not students are gaining advanced knowledge on specific subjects and learning college-level materials while they are still in high schools” (Texas Education Agency, 2002b, 27). A high quality AP teacher may fulfill this objective even though student exam performance falls below that of other AP students nationwide.

Even if all students entered the AP Program with identical levels of preparation, AP exam scores alone would not necessarily reflect the quality of an AP course. Each AP exam is based

on one teaching approach which, while generally reflective of what is done at large universities, is not necessarily the best. The degree of consensus among university faculty regarding what should be taught in the introductory courses that the AP Program is designed to emulate varies widely by subject. For example, the National Research Council suggests that the AP math and science curricula cover too many topics at the expense of a “deep conceptual understanding of the content and unifying concepts of a discipline” (2002, 199). Several prestigious prep schools agree and discontinued their AP Programs as a result (Zhao, 2002; Santoli, 2002; Mathews, 2003). It is important for administrators to recognize that AP exam scores in large part reflect the curriculum covered in the AP class, and students whose teachers choose to cover fewer topics in greater depth are, all else equal, likely to score lower on the AP exam. Evaluating AP course quality based solely on student exam scores penalizes teachers who responsibly exchange quantity for quality and tailor the AP curriculum to their students’ needs.

When AP exam scores are used to assess program quality, it is desirable from a statistical standpoint to require all AP students to take the exams. However, requiring all students enrolled in AP classes to take the AP exam pushes students away from the AP Program and towards the local community college or university. Dual enrollment is becoming increasingly popular and allows students to gain transferable college credit without taking the AP exam. Pushing students away from AP classrooms and towards college or junior college classrooms is undesirable to the extent that AP classes provide more classroom hours and assignments, continual monitoring of progress, a standardized curriculum, and smaller class sizes than comparable college classes.

Unfortunately, the potential consequences of requiring all AP students to take the AP exam extend beyond pushing students towards dual enrollment. Evaluating schools based on exam results gives schools the incentive to limit AP enrollment to only the most capable

students. Hispanic, Black and low-income students earn passing scores on AP exams at dramatically lower rates than white students (Texas Education Agency, 2002b). Schools evaluated based on student AP exam performance may strategically limit enrollment to exclude these groups. Such a policy runs contrary to the goals of the College Board by establishing incentives that make it difficult to foster a racially and socioeconomically diverse AP classroom.

In order to accurately assess AP Program quality, a multidimensional measure of quality must be devised. In order to accomplish this, however, a clear definition of quality must be devised. The National Research Council recommends that the primary goal of advanced study in any discipline in high school “should be for students to achieve a deep conceptual understanding of the discipline’s content and unifying concepts. Well-designed programs help students develop skills of inquiry, analysis, and problem solving so that they become superior learners” (2002, 197-8). In the same report, the Council expresses concern about the serious limitations faced by minorities, inner-city and rural students wishing to pursue advanced study. By National Research Council standards, a quality AP Program develops “superior learners” while maintaining (or establishing) equity and access to traditionally underserved groups. Such standards are consistent with those put forth by the College Board, but current assessment tools fail to capture these essential components of a quality AP Program.

One method of assessing AP teachers that maintains incentives consistent with the National Research Council and College Board’s goals utilizes teaching portfolios that contain multiple indicators of performance. In addition to AP test scores, which are currently the sole evaluative measure, teaching portfolios should include a statement from the teacher describing his or her teaching philosophy and approach to developing the AP course. In such a statement, the teacher might discuss ways in which the course is being tailored to meet the needs of students

at that particular school and how and why the course has changed from one year to the next. Supporting statements from outside observers, including other AP teachers, administrators, or faculty from local community colleges or universities, might also be included. Portfolios might also include student evaluations and, whenever possible, letters from prior students indicating the contribution of the AP course to the student's overall preparedness for college. Seldin (1997) discusses teaching portfolios at length.

Aligning Teacher, Parent, Counselor, and Administrator Expectations

With the increasing importance of AP experience in college admissions, it is important that parents, counselors, and administrators recognize the costs and benefits of the AP Program. Parents need to understand that AP students are likely to work harder and receive lower grades in AP courses than in other high school courses. The ultimate payoff comes in the form of study skills that will ease the transition to college and tuition savings if the student earns a passing score on the AP exam. As previously discussed, counselors must similarly appreciate the demands of the program so that appropriate students are placed in AP classes. Finally, administrators need to understand the program in order to match well-suited teachers with AP classes, encourage AP teachers to create and pursue professional development opportunities, and defend the high standards of AP teachers in the face of unhappy parents.

In order to align expectations within the school, AP teachers can meet jointly with administrators and counselors to discuss the costs and benefits of AP. In order to align expectations between teachers and parents, AP teachers might consider holding a "parent night" to educate families. In addition, it may be helpful to have students *and* their parents sign a contract at the beginning of the term acknowledging that AP classes are more difficult than other classes and that students will have to work much harder to earn the grades they have come to

expect. Having administrators sign these contracts can increase their understanding of the program as well.

Conclusions

A well-run Advanced Placement Program provides high school students from a wide range of backgrounds with valuable information about college. Students are challenged by a rigorous curriculum, but perhaps more important, they learn study skills and habits of mind conducive to success in college. AP classes allow students to learn these skills in a familiar high school environment with a level of individualized attention that is unavailable at most colleges and universities.

In contrast, a poorly run AP Program provides students with misinformation that may make the transition to college more difficult than it would otherwise be. If an AP course is presented as “college-level” but is not demanding, students get the impression that no greater effort will be required in college than in high school. This can happen if an AP teacher does not know the material well or if administrators fail to support an AP teacher who sets high intellectual standards. Teachers can take responsibility for their own professional development and for educating parents and administrators about the uniqueness of the AP program in order to avoid such an outcome.

Some simple measures can enable schools with limited financial resources to maintain a high quality AP Program and to ensure that the program is accessible to highly motivated students from all backgrounds. First, teachers should only be matched with AP courses if they are willing to dedicate themselves to ongoing professional development. This is particularly true for teachers placed outside their primary field of expertise. If no such teacher can be found in a

particular AP subject, the class should not be offered. It is important to recognize that professional development models lifelong learning for students and need not be costly.

Second, schools should carefully consider their enrollment criteria for AP students and ensure that it includes multiple measures of achievement and motivation. Goal-oriented, motivated students with relatively low test scores are likely to gain more from the program than unmotivated students with high test scores, for example. Third, while state officials might make the unfortunate decision to evaluate schools based on AP exam participation and scores, local administrators should never evaluate teachers solely on these factors. AP Program quality must be defined in a manner that creates incentives (or minimizes disincentives) for the inclusion of historically marginalized students and the provision of a high quality AP experience for all students. A multi-faceted teacher assessment protocol will benefit underrepresented students in particular by giving teachers the freedom to tailor AP courses to their students' needs. Such a protocol also encourages teachers to seek out students who have the most to gain from the AP Program, including those from traditionally underrepresented student groups.

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Notes

¹ Overall, 24 percent of secondary classes in math, science, social studies or language arts were taught by teachers lacking at least a minor in the field in 2000. The percentage is larger at high-poverty and high-minority schools (Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002).

² The College Board's "AP Potential" software identifies capable students, based on PSAT scores, who may not be achieving their academic potential. While such test scores might be useful for finding a "diamond in the rough" student who would benefit from the AP experience, students should never be excluded from AP based on any one such criterion.

³ A diluted AP curriculum can be injurious to the extent that it gives students unrealistic expectations about the level of effort that is required for success in college.