



Update on Advanced Placement

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As Advanced Placement coursework emerges as an instrument of public policy, educators and policymakers need to understand the facts, to set realistic expectations, and to engage in activities that promote positive outcomes.

Context

When the College Board initiated the Advanced Placement (AP) Program in 1955, its potential as a public policy tool was yet to be imagined. For much of its history, the program focused on academically accomplished high school students who were college-bound. It offered these students the opportunity to earn college credit, be placed in advanced-level college courses, or both—if they could demonstrate sufficient knowledge through AP exams.

Though the basic AP approach has remained the same, societal changes have catapulted the program into the public policy arena. The emergence of a global economy and the rapid pace of technological change have beckoned the need for a far greater number of workers with postsecondary credentials in the United States. Among the most critical variables that contribute to postsecondary success is the completion of a rigorous high school curriculum.

Growing concerns about the shortcomings of the nation's K-12 system have led educators and policymakers to implement a variety of strategies to promote academic rigor and success for all high school students.

Since the 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in public policies that focus specifically on the AP program. This springs, in part, from an emerging belief that exposure to AP coursework—even without taking or passing the AP exam—provides the academic challenge and motivation students need to adequately prepare for and succeed in college. There is also the notion that AP participation can be expanded relatively quickly compared to other strategies that require more fundamental, long-term changes to secondary education. Increasingly, AP is being used as an instrument to foster academic preparation of groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in the AP ranks—lower-income students, racial/ethnic minorities, and students who

are less academically accomplished. Most recently, AP has become one of the tools identified for addressing American competitiveness. Even U.S. President George W. Bush has taken an interest, calling for the number of students who take AP math and science exams to triple and to add 70,000 more AP teachers in those subjects.

Whether AP can live up to these growing expectations remains to be seen. It is useful to take a step back and review some of the facts and trends related to the AP program.

Observations

Participation in the Advanced Placement program has grown dramatically over time, particularly in the past decade, but inequities remain in access and success.

The College Board offers AP exams in a wide variety of subject areas, 37 in all; the most frequently taken tests are U.S. History, English Literature and Composition, English Language and Composition, Calculus, U.S. Government and Politics, Biology, Psychology, Spanish Language, Statistics, and Chemistry. Today, more than two thirds of all high schools offer at least one AP course. Nearly a quarter of public high school graduates in 2006 took at least one AP exam, reflecting a four-fold increase during the past two decades. Many others are taking courses but not exams. But while participation has increased, the proportion of test-takers who succeed with a score of three or higher—the grade typically used by institutions to grant college credit or advanced placement—has decreased from 67.6 percent to 59.4 percent. Perhaps this finding is not surprising given that rapid expansion of AP may mean that teachers have not had the time to acquire adequate training and skills in the delivery of AP coursework and that some less-prepared students are to be found in the enlarged pool of AP test-takers.

It is good news that all 50 states have seen growth in the percent of high school graduates succeeding on AP exams. (This means that in total numbers, more students are achieving high levels of performance on AP exams than ever before, but more also are failing the exams.) It is less encouraging that geography remains a major factor in high school student access

to and success in AP courses. States ranged from a high of 22.7 percent of graduates scoring three or better to a low of only 2.3 percent. And even today, while nearly all large schools offer AP, only about 40 percent of small schools do.

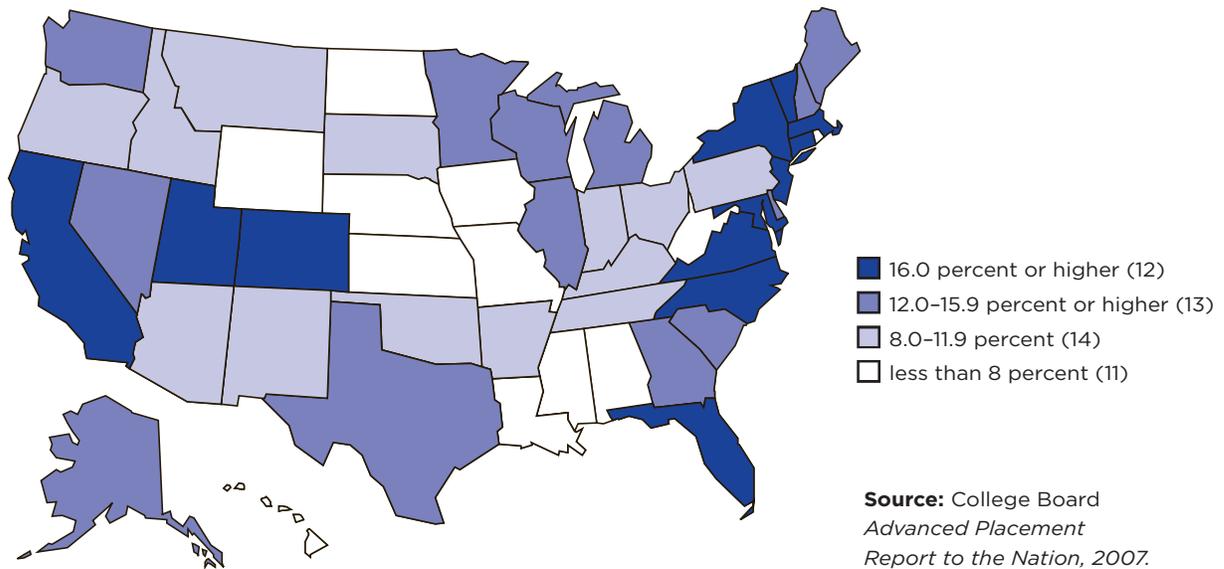
There has been much progress in expanding AP access to traditionally underserved minorities, but gaps remain. African American students (13.7 percent of the student population) are significantly underrepresented in AP nationwide, representing only 6.9 percent of AP test-takers. Nationwide, the gap for Hispanic participation in AP has been eliminated, but Hispanics remain underrepresented among the ranks of AP test-takers in 38 states. Differences among groups remain in the test scores achieved, with higher average scores for Asian and white students than for African American and Hispanic students.

Research indicates that students who succeed in AP exams are more likely to attend and succeed in college, and these correlations hold for all income levels and racial/ethnic groups. However, it is difficult to establish a causal link between AP and college success, and there is conflicting evidence as to whether students who take AP courses but do not pass the exams will be more successful in college.

Researchers in Texas have compared the academic success of entering college students who did not take AP coursework in high school, those who took courses but not the exams, and those who took both the courses and exams. They found that those who took both the courses and exams were most successful in college, and that those who took courses but not exams were more successful than those with no AP coursework. This research is significant because it took into account factors that affect college performance, such as SAT scores and participation in the Free or Reduced Lunch Program. Yet, it did not control on motivation, which may be is a significant factor in college success.

Unfortunately, these findings contradict other research showing that simply enrolling in AP coursework but not taking exams does not result in greater performance in college. In addition, U.S. Department of Education research has not found AP coursework to be a significant predictor of college success, apart from the fact that academic intensity of

Advanced Placement and Performance in Public Schools
 Percent of Students from the Class of 2006 Scoring 3 or higher on an AP Exam



high school curriculum overall is highly predictive of college completion.

Public policymakers at the state and federal levels are implementing policies to increase AP opportunities in a variety of ways. Some focus on expanding access to AP coursework while others emphasize performance on AP exams.

Thirty-two states have some policy related to AP. These include mandating that schools offer AP courses; building statewide virtual AP learning opportunities; developing uniform policies for accepting college credit for AP; offering financial incentives to students, teachers, and schools for successful outcomes; reimbursing low-income students for test fees; and offering or mandating training to ensure that AP teachers are qualified.

Arkansas has the most comprehensive state policy on AP. Legislation passed in 2003 requires that all public high schools in the state offer at least one AP course in four core areas—math, English, science, and social science—by 2008-2009. All AP teachers must obtain College Board-sponsored or endorsed training, and schools must offer pre-AP courses that are approved by the state’s Department of Education. The state is working with the College Board to help strengthen

and align curriculum from middle school through high school and AP.

Florida uses the PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary SAT/ National Merit Scholar Qualifying Test) to identify students who are likely to succeed on AP exams and guides them toward taking an AP course. In Texas, AP test fees are reimbursed to students who score a three or higher, and financial incentives are offered to schools and teachers when students score three or better. North Carolina and Virginia are among the states that provide virtual AP learning opportunities.

Many states have been helped by federal programs designed to encourage the participation of low-income students. The AP Test Fee program provides grants to states to enable them to pay the AP test fees for low-income students. The AP Incentive Program provides grants to states, districts, and national nonprofits to support the development of AP courses through professional development for teachers, curriculum development, purchase of books and supplies, and other activities.

With the rapid expansion of AP in recent years, concerns have arisen that implementation has been uneven and some courses are being watered down.

Some critics argue that many AP courses are poor substitutes for college-level coursework. Some postsecondary faculty, for example, have argued that students who pass AP exams—especially those who achieve only a score of three—are not necessarily ready for the next level course in college.

To address concern about program quality, the College Board has developed an AP Course Audit program designed to assure that courses meet college-level standards. Starting with the 2007–2008 academic year, all high schools that offer AP classes will have to submit course syllabi and other materials to the College Board for review. Only courses that meet the College Board’s course standards, developed in consultation with colleges, will be added to a list of authorized classes to be published online next fall.

Conclusion

The Advanced Placement program offers a promising strategy for promoting college success—one that will be most effective when students are prepared for rigorous coursework and when that coursework meets high standards. Policymakers need to continue to strengthen the high school curriculum for all and to allocate resources for AP where they will do the most good. Researchers need to refine their studies to better explain the relationships between taking AP coursework, passing AP exams, and succeeding in college, and to better understand how exposure to AP affects economically disadvantaged and historically underrepresented groups. College and university leaders need to monitor how well their students are doing when they enter with AP credits. They may need to provide extra support for students who have placed into higher-level coursework and feedback to high schools about these students. AP policies must be integrated with broader-based policies that promote college access, preparation, and success.

Resources

Academic Pathways to Access and Student Success

(APASS). As part of its national inventory of academic pathways that enhance the transition to postsecondary education, APASS has assembled state-by-state information on AP presence in each state, efforts to reach underserved students, and state support.

apass.uiuc.edu/

Advanced Placement Strategies, Inc. (APS). APS is a non-profit organization that works with schools and the private sector in Texas to maximize the number of students passing AP exams.

apstrategies.org/

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

(AASCU). AASCU’s policy brief *Improving Alignment, Advancing Students: Demands and Opportunities for States, Systems, and Campuses* (2005) provides background on issues related to college access and success.

aascu.org/perspectives/

College Board. The AP Central website offers the Advanced Placement Report to the Nation, research on AP, and information for institutions on setting credit and placement policy.

apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf

Education Commission of the States (ECS). ECS has developed the policy brief *Advanced Placement* (2006).

ecs.org/clearinghouse/67/44/6744.pdf (112k)

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

(WICHE). WICHE’s research report *Accelerated Learning Options: Moving the Needle on Access and Success* (2006) contains a state-level policy audit of advanced placement and other accelerated learning options. A related policy brief is *Accelerated Learning Options: A Promising Strategy for States* (2006).

wiche.edu