



The End of AP?

The Advanced Placement Program is being tested by competition, student rejection, and a changing landscape



By Wayne D'Orio | June/July 2009

Trying to gauge the future of the Advanced Placement Program is a bit like tackling a tricky question on an English Composition exam.

Consider that in the last two years, the College Board has forced schools to undertake the unpopular task of auditing their AP courses, and it has seen another high-level program—International Baccalaureate—experience tremendous growth in this country. Next year, it will pull the plug on four of its courses because of dwindling interest. Add to this the Scarsdale problem: Two years ago, the high-performing school district in New York's Westchester County very publicly announced it was dropping AP classes, choosing instead to create its own advanced courses.

On the other hand, the AP program continues to thrive. In the last five years, nearly 20 percent more schools are offering at least one AP course. More students are taking the courses, about one in four 2008 high school graduates. And 11 percent more colleges and universities—more than 3,800 in all—accept qualifying AP exam grades for either credit or placement, a far higher number than recognize the IB program. And even though large numbers of minority and low-income students are taking AP tests, the average scores are rising: The number of students scoring a 3 or better on AP tests went from 12.2 percent in 2003 to 15.2 percent in 2008. In 18 states, the achievement gap between Hispanic or Latino students and white students decreased.

Which response best sums up the two paragraphs above?

- A) The AP Program continues to grow and meet 21st-century student needs.
- B) Competition from the IB program, dual enrollment (where high school students also take college courses before they graduate), and online classes will outstrip AP's gains.
- C) Somewhere in between A and B.

As you can tell, there are plenty of arguments for either A or B, but obviously the answer is C. Advanced Placement courses are still a popular option but they are not the only game in town. Competition from IB, online classes, and other college readiness programs is quickly increasing.

Does IB Compete?

AP classes started 55 years ago to serve three purposes: to help prepare high school students for the rigorous study they would face in higher education; to help these students gain admittance to competitive colleges; and to allow college admission officers some way to compare students from different sections of the country. By these measures, the program still works.

But competition has entered the picture in several different formats. The International Baccalaureate's diploma program, a two-year curricula in which all students take top-level courses in a variety of subjects, culminates in a highly respected, world-class diploma. Although IB is only offered at about 650 schools in North America, it has grown more than 66 percent in the past five years and is a point of pride for districts.

Officials from both the AP and IB programs say these separate courses of study don't compete with each other, but some school officials, such as Kathleen Lyons Wallace, Choate Rosemary Hall's dean of academic affairs, admit that schools usually choose one program or the other. Choate recently examined its offerings and, in the end, chose AP. While Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools offers both programs, it offers AP at some of its 26 high schools and IB at the others (IB is more comprehensive, AP offers greater flexibility).

Dual-enrollment programs are multiplying around the country, although the exact growth is hard to pin down. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that more than 800,000 students in 2002-03, about 5 percent of the high school population, took college

classes.

But College Board vice president Trevor Packer says the more opportunities to prepare students for college, the better. AP classes are offered in 70 percent of the high schools with dual-enrollment programs, and AP grows more rapidly in schools that offer IB programs than in those that don't. "These programs only enhance our agenda," he says. "We think there's a long way to go to boost student readiness."

The Scarsdale Decision

Packer is less enamored of Scarsdale's decision to drop AP and create its own college-level classes, Advanced Topics. He maintains that Scarsdale High School had the flexibility to revamp its offerings under the AP umbrella, and, in fact, a good number of students in the new classes still take AP exams.

Because AP's exams are wide-ranging, students only need to get half the questions correct to receive the top score of 5, Packer says. This allows high school teachers, just like college professors, the freedom to delve deeply into some topics more than others.

Scarsdale superintendent Michael McGill says that while technically this explanation may be true, teachers felt driven to cover what was on the AP test, "gaming" their classes by teaching with the test in mind. Teachers themselves requested the change, saying the classes put them on a treadmill that didn't allow the freedom to spend two weeks studying the presidential election, or the time to visit the Franklin D. Roosevelt home in nearby Hyde Park, New York.

Choate's Wallace says her school offers more than 20 AP courses because "our students and families expect us to offer challenging courses at advanced levels." The school has comparable courses in topics not covered by AP, and some that go beyond AP requirements, she adds.

The AP program was originally created as a way for students to take challenging courses in areas of interest, but the intense pressure to get into college has led many students to see "how many AP classes you can squeeze on the head of a pin," says Patricia Mostue, director of testing and assessment at Worcester (MA) Public Schools.

Cuts and Growth

In the midst of AP's growth, however, the College Board is ending four classes after this school year for lack of interest: Computer Science AB, Italian, Latin Literature, and French Literature.

But the possibility of progress and expansion for AP and other college prep programs remains bright. President Obama in his February speech to the joint session of Congress called for all Americans to "pursue education beyond high school." Currently, two of every three high school graduates proceed to college, but about one in four students drops out of high school before earning a diploma. Packer says AP tests and curricula will continue to evolve, giving students not only the content knowledge they need, but also the ability to apply that knowledge to new situations.

Judging College Readiness

Although there's been an outcry for years over high school graduation rates, they're still much higher than college graduation rates.

Only about 27 percent of college students graduate within four years or less, with another 25 percent graduating in five or six years of study. Much of this news points to students' readiness for the rigor of higher education; a 2006 report from the Washington, D.C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education shows that one in three college freshmen is taking at least one remedial course.

The good news for students who take AP classes is that even those who fail to get a 3 on the year-end test (roughly equivalent to a college grade of C) perform better at college than those who haven't taken an AP class, says Packer. The question may be how to bring regular high-school course offerings up to the level of AP—and thus render them unnecessary.