

**The Role of
Advanced Placement Courses in
Enabling High Achievement
In Every High School:
A Research Paper**

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Increasing numbers of states mandate universal availability of Advanced Placement (AP) courses to make college education accessible to a broader population of students. School districts and teachers are under acute pressure to respond to this demanding challenge.

As school districts strive to provide greater opportunities for more students, educators – and the public – ask some provocative questions:

- **Where are qualified teachers who can deliver on the promise of access to advanced coursework for all students who perform well academically?**
- **How can we provide the challenging curricula** that make high school a path to a vibrant academic and economic future?

Advanced Placement programs are increasingly important to the nation's high schools. According to information released by the College Board, fully half of U.S. high schools currently offer AP courses. However, of the large number of students who complete these courses, fewer than half take a formal Advanced Placement exam given by the College Board.

The experience of AP dramatically impacts a student's life. Data confirmed by multiple independent longitudinal studies reveal:

- **Students who earn high scores on an AP exam can place out of that course** in more than 3000 colleges nationwide, saving time and expense in their college education.
 - *For typical AP students and their parents, this savings equals the price of one semester to one year in college*
- **AP students gain confidence and mastery** – whether or not they even take the exam, and regardless of their exam score.
 - *Having completed college-level work, these students consequently show dramatic improvement in their freshman-year performance in higher education.*
- **Even those students who do not take AP courses benefit from having the courses available in their schools.** Schools with strong AP programs are motivated to provide increased access to prerequisite courses and preparatory materials for larger number of students.
 - *The odds of students' attaining a bachelor's degree in college nearly double if they have completed mathematics courses in high school beyond Algebra II, such as trigonometry or pre-calculus.*

Educational Trends and AP Expansion

Two marked trends in American education underscore the importance of AP coursework.

Trend #1: A growing number of states are taking up the challenge of improving high school education.

Much of the school reform since the 1983 release of *A Nation At Risk* has focused on improving K–8 education. Consequently, Texas, North Carolina, and at least ten other states have shown dramatic gains in student performance for grades K–8, but little gain has been demonstrated in any state at grades 9–12. In effect, the school reform movement of the past two decades has built an eight-lane highway through Grade 8 – a well-built route that speeds into a series of rough roads that characterize the reality of the contemporary American high school for teachers, administrators, and students.

Trend #2: Public systems of higher education have pulled back from affirmative action admissions criteria in the face of recent legal decisions. The absence of affirmative action creates a clear and immediate need to strengthen pre-college education standards so that students of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels have access to a true college-preparatory curriculum.

As states focus on improving high schools in a post–affirmative action climate, they are looking to the College Board’s Advanced Placement program for benchmarks and objective measures of their students’ performance. One appeal of the AP program is that it provides external, national standards for measuring the quality of local instruction: A score of 5 in AP U.S. History from Central High School, U.S.A. shows the same achievement as a score of 5 from the Bronx High School of Science.

In response to these trends and challenges, the AP program is expanding quickly and is forecast to grow at even faster rates. In 1956, approximately 50,000 AP exams were taken; in 2001, the number was well over 1 million. The projected number of exams to be taken in 2005 is estimated at 3.5 million.

Expanding AP Promises Greater Equity

In some of the nation’s most prestigious colleges and universities, entrance requirements are so rigorous that only students who have completed Advanced Placement courses can qualify for admission. This places students in affluent communities--whose schools are typically those most able to afford healthy Advanced Placement programs--at a significant advantage and, by extension, places other students at a disadvantage.

This inequity, combined with the removal of affirmative action as a criterion for college admission in major states, has led to lawsuits concerning the issue of fair access to high-quality education. State legislatures in California, Florida, and Texas have responded with mandates for the growth of Advanced Placement, and other states are following suit.

Another equity challenge: Top students who do not have access to AP end up with lower grade point averages. That is because students in many states justly earn bonus points for their success in Advanced Placement courses, allowing them to earn high school grade-point averages above 4.0, previously the highest possible score.

In 1999, more than 1,500 black and Hispanic students with near-perfect high school transcripts were rejected from the University of California campuses at Los Angeles and Berkeley, solely because their high schools did not offer enough AP courses for them to earn the cutoff “admissions” grade-point averages - roughly 4.3 on a 4-point scale. The failure of these students to gain admission to the University of California’s elite schools has been the subject of a highly publicized lawsuit. As a result, many states are preemptively reviewing their state supports and policies regarding the AP program. Top among these policy questions: Whose children will have access to the Advanced Placement program?

Next Steps

The development of rich multi-course Advanced Placement programs in every high school, along with the support systems that permit teachers and students to take advantage of them, will be key to seeing that all students are given the opportunity to succeed in postsecondary education. This challenge provides an opportunity for the design and release of a new category of educational offerings-- resources that harness the power of the Internet and that meet the growing demand for quality and efficiency at the school, school district, state, and federal levels.