

# To AP or not to AP – Overview & Discussion

## OVERVIEW

Getting to the bottom of what issues are actually being challenged in the popular press<sup>1</sup> about AP courses requires reading an *abundance* of articles and research on the topic of the College Board's AP course offerings. After doing so, a *very macro* problem is revealed as underlying the core debate: *should states require all schools to offer AP courses (see footnote <sup>2</sup>), and should all students take them?* This debate centers on whether foundational learning has occurred *first* in some schools, and whether certain schools might spend their scarce resource dollars on other programs. Yet, are low income schools at a disadvantage in the college game if they don't offer AP, as college admissions rely on AP scores to vet likely successful students from thousands of apps?

**This is a VERY different question from whether "my" student should take advantage of the AP courses at York. Fortunately, this personal question is much easier to answer than the macro policy questions that appear to be at the heart of most media debates around AP.**

### WHY TAKE AN AP CLASS?

- Be challenged. Advanced Placement classes are rigorous and demanding, offering an intellectual stimulation that students won't get in regular high school courses.
- Improve college admissions chances. AP classes will raise the "wow" factor of a student's high school record. If a student does well in an AP class, it's a signal to admissions counselors that he or she is ready for the pressures of college study.
- Arrive at college better prepared. AP classes sharpen students' writing skills, teach them how to think critically, and improve their problem-solving abilities. AP students learn to navigate the academic expectations they'll encounter in college courses.
- Earn college credit. AP exams are scored on a scale of 1 (lowest) through 5 (highest). If a student earns a 3 or higher, he or she MAY receive course credits, advanced placement, or both upon arriving at college. AP policies vary from school to school, but the majority of colleges in the U.S. (as well as colleges and universities in 40 other countries) grant credit and/or accelerated placement for AP exams.  
**See <https://blog.collegevine.com/can-ap-tests-actually-save-you-thousands-of-dollars/> for a useful discussion on this topic.**
- Win scholarships. AP courses and exam scores help students qualify for scholarships. According to The College Board, 31 percent of colleges and universities look at AP experience when making scholarship decisions.
- Save money. Students with AP experience and credits are more likely to graduate from college in four years. Extra semesters (or years) at college can put a heavy financial burden on families.

### WHO SHOULD TAKE AN AP CLASS?

The Advanced Placement experience is not for every student. Before choosing to enroll your child in an AP course, consider these factors:

- Your child's past performance in the subject area. If a student has always excelled at science, AP Chemistry may be a great idea. On the other hand, if he or she tends to struggle in math, AP Calculus might be too much of an ordeal.
- Your child's skills. AP courses in the humanities-English, history, philosophy, etc.-require heavy amounts of reading and writing. Is your student prepared for long, difficult reading assignments, multiple essays, and in-depth research papers?
- Your child's schedule. A student who plays sports year-round, holds leadership positions in one or more extracurricular activities, and/or has a part-time job may find it difficult to meet the sizeable obligations of an AP class.
- Your child's GPA. No student should take an AP course if it's likely to lower his or her overall GPA. College admissions officers want to see students taking challenging courses, but they also want to see strong grades. If your child is worried about maintaining decent grades in an AP course, it might be wise to stay with an honors course.

*Source: StudyPoint*

## **DISCUSSION (points and counter-points)**

### **WHAT PARENTS SAY:**

*Source: Grown&Flown unless noted otherwise*

How many Advanced Placement courses should I take? The answer of course depends on the student's academic interests, personal goals and aspirations, the courses he/she has taken throughout high school, and the grades earned in those courses.

**"My son went to a private school where AP courses were not offered. I did not think this was a big deal and he got into the college of his choice. Then when he actually went to school, he couldn't get some of the classes he wanted because other freshmen had more credits than him due to the AP classes they took. They had priority because they had more credits than him.**

**"Students (and parents) benefit by coming in with the hours, yes. But the college counselors are not trained to help students walking in with 30 or 45 credits.**

**"AP courses are very good for college admissions and entering college with credits, thus saving parents/student money for classes that they already earned in high school**

**"The issue the college advisors see over and over is students taking AP classes in the core science prerequisites for professional schools. The AP classes do not seem to prepare the students for the upper level coursework**

**"Our state university recommended NOT taking AP physics or calculus for incoming engineering students (*for the purpose of testing out of prerequisites*). The reasoning being that teaching styles and content will still vary, and university Calc 1 will usually be more strenuous than AP Calc, they preferred that the engineering majors learned their foundational courses at the university.**

**"When given the choice of doing either AP or dual credit, I think the dual credit option is the better way to go. If you can go to a community college and do well in that class then you are guaranteed the college credit for it. And if it's an accredited college, that credit will transfer to your college of choice. When you take an AP class, you are not guaranteed college credit**

**"Our oldest was dual enrollment and left high school with over 30 college credits. Unfortunately we didn't stay in the area she attended classes so those credits became electives when they were even accepted. It is not always clear where a child will attend college so keep that in mind. The other snafu is transferring...when she transferred to another school the credits didn't transfer either**

**"You get the cream of the crop teachers, you are able to experience the "stress" of college while having support at home and you receive college credit. While my older daughter went to Cal and could have used her AP credits to graduate early, she chose to stay the full four years to earn two degrees.**

**"The training of A.P. (and I.B.) teachers is quite good. It helps them see ways to present content imaginatively."**

**"In hindsight, I think it ended up being crucial to securing merit-based scholarships at the medium-sized private colleges my sons now attend"**

**As you make your plans, also remember to also look into miscellaneous "logistical" considerations. Find out how your student's choice of program might affect other options in the school day. For instance, do scheduling constraints mean that an AP student cannot sign up for chorus, orchestra or certain clubs? AP science courses usually include a lab requirement that occurs during the lunch period. (source: *AB Making the Most of York*)**

## WHAT COLLEGE COACHES SAY:

Know your student and realize that your “A” student may not get an “A” in AP. Look into what credits your potential colleges will accept and plan your APs accordingly. They provide great opportunities but can take their toll during high school. Each family needs to decide what is best for their individual student.

**Students are not more competitive (in college admissions) simply because they take these more advanced courses. They also need to do well in them (and develop in the other areas of their lives).**

For students seeking admission to highly selective schools, three to five A.P. courses can be great. More than that will almost never make you more attractive to those colleges that reject more students than they accept.

**A.P. courses are, for the most part, rigorous, challenging and demanding, and can be a real boon to students motivated by intellectual curiosity and a love of learning. For students looking to please their parents or for those in pursuit of transcript padding and other false academic idols, A.P. courses can be an unpleasant and unhealthy slog. Therefore, in deciding whether or not an A.P. class is “worth it,” students and parents must figure their own motivations and values into the equation.**

The expectations at the most selective colleges in the country are that the student will take the highest level available in all five major subject areas (math, science, history/social science, English and foreign language). This can and often does mean taking AP courses in all five subjects by the time the student is a senior. As colleges get less selective, the expectations in terms of curriculum rigor get slightly lower, and many of the schools in this country don't expect to see any AP classes at all.

“We have found that the best predictors **at Harvard** are Advanced Placement tests and International Baccalaureate Exams, closely followed by the College Board subject tests. High school grades are next in predictive power, followed by the SAT and ACT. The writing tests of the SAT and ACT have predictive power similar to the subject tests.”

Bill Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions

**“There are students who intend to apply to some of the most selective colleges and feel that taking AP courses would be too much work. The reality is that if you want to be viewed as a student who enjoys learning and accepts challenges, “you can't eat your cake and have it too”.**

If a senior student knows their colleges of choice will not give them credit or placement for AP testing, there may not be any compelling reason for them to take AP exams in their senior year, even if they took the course(s).

**A benefit of taking AP courses is the following award(s) that a student can achieve:**

- AP Scholar Award - students who earn a grade of 3 or higher on three or more AP Exams.
  - AP Scholar with Honor - students who earn an average grade of at least 3.25 on all AP Exams taken, with no grades below a 3 on four or more AP exams.
  - AP Scholar with Distinction - to students who earn an average grade of at least 3.5 on all AP Exams taken, with no grades below a 3 on five or more AP exams.
  - State AP - one female and one male student in each state in the U.S. who earn a grade of at least 3 on the most AP Exams, and achieve the highest average grade (at least 3.5) on all AP Exams taken.
  - National AP Scholar - students in the US who receive a grade of 4 or higher on eight or more AP exams.
- If you have an AP Scholar award, you can list it on resumes and college applications.

**(Note: There are no scholarships specifically tied to the AP Scholar program, although the College Board says that 31 percent of colleges and universities look at AP experience when making scholarship decisions)**

## WHAT THE MEDIA SAYS:

AP exams are a distinctly American solution to the problem that standards in American education are subjective and vary widely from school to school. As an objective measure that allows for the comparison of students at different schools, AP exams play the same role as the matriculation examinations used in high-performing education systems in Europe and Asia.

*“Just because more students than ever before are taking AP exams for advanced college placement does not mean that these students are actually doing well on the exams. Instead, some high schools encourage students to take the exams to inflate their own number of students who take the exams...even if the students are getting 1’s and 2’s on the 5-point grading scale. According to the New York Times, “Politicians and educators in many states have promoted the [AP] program, hoping to provide more rigor beyond the traditional curriculum. But the failure rate is also higher on A.P. exams, which are graded on a scale of 1 to 5. The proportion of exams earning low scores of 1 or 2 rose to 42.5 percent in 2010, up from 36.4 percent in 2000.” **(Please refer to opening paragraph for context on this comment.)***

*... taking an AP class does not lead to better grades in college, higher college graduation rates, or any other tangible benefit — **unless the student does well enough to pass the AP test.** (Trevor Packer, a senior vice president at the College Board). That means that hundreds of thousands of students enrolled in AP may be better served by lower-level classes that focus on building foundational skills.”*

As summed up by Philip M. Sadler, one of the co-editors of *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program* (published by Harvard Press) and the F.W. Wright Senior Lecturer in Astronomy at Harvard, here is the outlook for students: “Advanced Placement courses offer you an opportunity to study a subject in a very rigorous and demanding fashion. You will probably be in a class that has fewer students, those students will likely have stronger backgrounds, and there will be fewer student discipline issues than you have experienced in other courses. Your teacher will have a strong subject matter background and excellent teaching skills.”

“From the perspective of college admissions officers, they are correct to assume that success in the courses is a meaningful measure of academic achievements (although he is quick to add that there are equally valid measures, such as success in other rigorous high school courses and dual enrollment programs in which high school students simultaneously take college courses).

*But where Sadler’s summary will challenge the College Board and others is in his description of the emphasis on **expanding the program to serve more and more high schools** (rather than on simply whether there is value to an individual student from taking AP classes).*

**A survey of more than 1,000 teachers of Advanced Placement courses in American high schools has found that more than half are concerned that the program's effectiveness is being threatened as districts loosen restrictions on who can take such rigorous courses and as students flock to them to polish their résumés.**

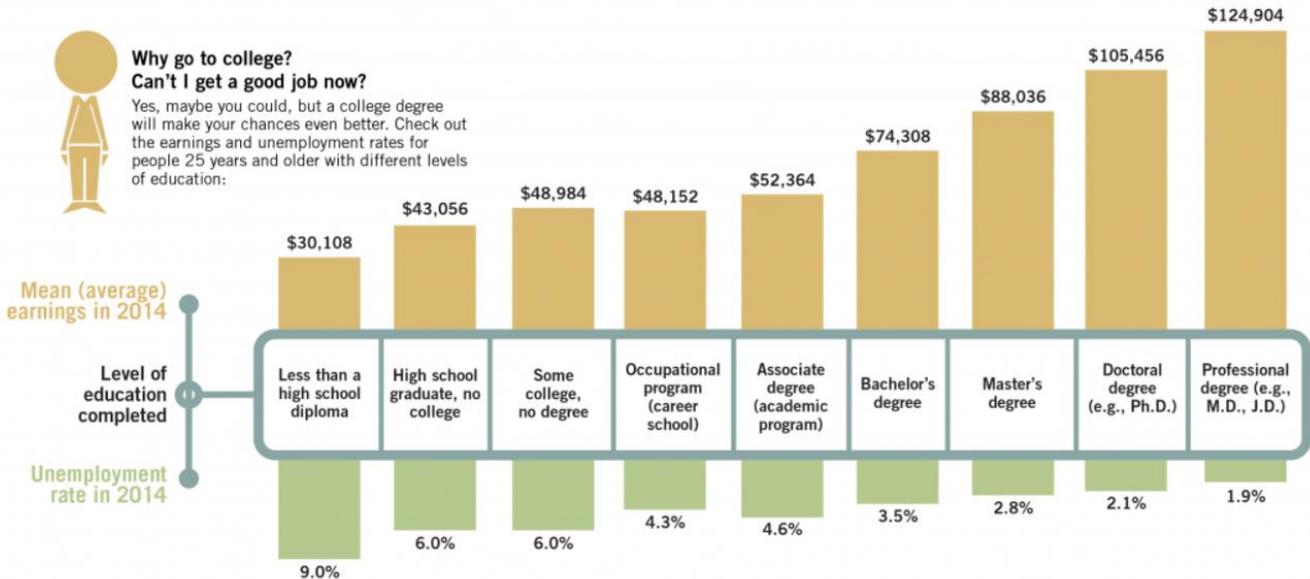
**Should access to AP classes be restricted to only those who can score well on the AP tests?**

Evaluate the answer in the context of our own District – are basic skills being sufficiently developed before grade 10 such that *any* student could be allowed to take an AP class if they chose to?

Do parents understand the content and expectations of AP coursework enough to help their student make this decision? The College Board ([apstudent.collegeboard.org/apcourse](http://apstudent.collegeboard.org/apcourse)) offers course descriptions that can be helpful when combined with insights from the student, his/her parents, the teacher, and counselor.

<sup>1</sup> The Atlantic, The Washington Post, The New York Times, among others

<sup>2</sup> The government encourages college attendance, which is why AP is such a big discussion topic in the media:



→ Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, unpublished tables 2015