

AP honors inclusivity at OWL

Our school recieved the AP Honors Gold with Access Award last month

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On Tuesday, December 16th, the school board presented OWL and principal Dave Gundale with the AP Honors Gold with Access Award. This award recognizes OWL's AP program as a thriving and diverse community rooted in the values of inclusion and access. It means that many students, of a variety of backgrounds, are taking AP classes and doing well on the tests.

According to the AP report, OWL is one of three schools in Minnesota that received the Gold with Access recognition. We rank in the top six percent nationally and even higher in Minnesota. Dave says, "I am very proud to say that we are the top ranked public school in Minneapolis and St. Paul and one of four schools in the state."

Dave explained how this award is very important to OWL because of all the curricular and systematic changes we have made to make AP classes more accessible. He states, "It is wonderful to see the number of students taking one or more AP courses because it is a sign that we are preparing our students for the rigor of post-secondary studies."

This award also has a very special impact on many of the teachers at OWL. Science teacher Megan Hall discusses how, in her eyes, the whole point of public education is to provide every child with the opportunity to become their best selves, no matter their background.

She shares how when she was an IB student at Southwest High School, a very diverse community, there were only three students of color in the six advanced classes she took her senior year.

To now see certain barriers like racism, access, and economics begin to break down is a huge success. Megan jokingly said, "I can retire happy now!"

Both English teacher Leo Bickelhaupt and Math teacher Tom Totushek state how rewarding recognition is and how much they appreciate the award. Leo says winning this award means that, "some of my hard work has maybe, just maybe, helped to make our school stronger."

Aside from personal affirmation, winning this award means a lot to our school as well. It highlights the importance of challenging yourself academically and creating inclusive and diverse learning environments. Tom commented, "It may help others see that OWL can create students who are college and career ready."

AP, or Advanced Placement, courses are rigorous classes that prepare students for college through higher level exams, papers, projects, and discussions. In the past, these classes were only deemed available to the privileged but over time they have become more accessible to all people, especially at OWL.

Before there were AP classes at OWL, there were advanced courses. Leo taught a four year rotating advanced English class that had a different theme each year. "I offered them as an

opportunity for students who were willing to read longer pieces and wanted to have a more discussion-oriented class," said Leo.

When Megan began teaching at OWL in 2006, she encouraged Leo to receive AP class training so his students could have the benefit of earning an AP credit. Both Leo and the principal of OWL at the time agreed to the AP training and course, and so AP classes came to OWL. Leo stated, "AP has given me access

time suggested eliminating AP classes from our curriculum because he believed that EL and AP couldn't coexist."

But instead of backing down OWL pushed forward, encouraging more teachers to receive AP training and providing more AP classes. Over time courses such as AP Computer Science, AP United States History and most recently, AP Art were added to the curriculum.

Yet to create a successful and inclusive program

advanced ELA has helped them to determine whether to challenge themselves or step back on a quarterly basis.

Megan commented, "When we made the switch to detrack classes, teachers had to change the way they ran their classes. The types of EL protocols we began to use in our classes such as fishbowls, projects, and other collaborative work were innovative pedagogies that were designed to help all students start thinking and working at a higher level."

Other programs such as AVID, which started this school year, have also helped teach students organizational and learning skills so they can excel in higher level academic environments.

Advertising AP classes as courses that are available to all students has helped make them much more accessible. Tom explained how the system students learn in heavily impacts their decisions regarding advanced and AP classes. "Making sure we have systems set up where historically underrepresented groups can access these courses early on is beneficial," said Tom.

In Leo's words, "I think what we have done specifically at OWL is to work hard to recruit a wider variety of students into AP classes. Crew leaders and teachers have helped to establish the mindset that everyone is welcome to these classes and over time it's become part of our school culture that AP classes are accessible to everyone."

He continued by saying, "A lot of students who don't think of themselves as 'AP students'

end up taking one or more AP classes because we as a school nudged them towards doing so. I believe that AP classes are important in helping keep kids challenged all the way through high school."

Both Leo and Megan express pride in the work our school has done. This award showcases the positive curricular changes, strong academic programs, and respectful learning environments OWL supports. "I'm proud to be a part of something bigger than myself and that makes our world a little closer to a beloved community," said Megan. She also pointed out that it's important to give credit to all the students who have gotten us this far, "The only reason we have an AP program is because, since 2006, a ton of students have pushed themselves by sometimes staying up, getting behind on work and then catching up, studying really hard, and always putting their best foot forward."

Looking towards the future, there is much to be hopeful for in regards to AP classes. Every year new adaptations are made to the program to make it even more inclusive, accessible, and engaging. Megan mentioned the option of adding more classes to the curriculum, such as AP African American studies, explaining how meaningful it could be to many students.

Leo said, "I'd like to see the program continue to grow and continue to attract a wide variety of students and help prepare them for college and beyond."



Purple Press Staff Photo

AP Biology teacher Megan Hall assists 11th grader Mya Chandler during a DNA lab. Megan has been a pioneer in creating an inclusive AP program at OWL.

to a lot of training, a network, and a more structured way to push students who want and need that challenge."

When the program initially started OWL was met with some backlash from the district due to inconsistent test scores and lack of data to prove the positive impact these classes were having.

Megan said, "When we joined the EL Education network the principal at the

OWL has had to adapt their curriculum. One of the biggest changes was the choice to detrack ELA and science courses. Academic tracking is when students are separated into standard and advanced courses and stay within those levels until they graduate. It can be very challenging to switch tracks once you begin.

Detracking these courses, and allowing students to switch between standard and