

Steering Students Into Advanced Placement (AP): The Rationale and Perceived Results of One High School's Experience

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One particular student, now graduated, seemed to me to be a poor candidate for AP English, but he worked hard and begged to stay in, despite earning grades in the 60's and 70's. He came back to visit this past fall and told me that his taking AP English was the most important experience he had had in high school, that he was confident and doing well in his two-year college, and that he planned to transfer to a four-year school.

Since 1996 I have taught AP English to between thirty and forty high school seniors each year. Such experiences raised questions in my mind: Can we really predict who will benefit from taking an AP course? Are we identifying and encouraging those students who stand to gain from it? What constitutes success in Advanced Placement courses? What do students have a right to expect, and what shall we expect of them?

Findings

High ability students, indeed all students, need to be encouraged to challenge themselves and develop their talents through sound curriculum and enrichment options. As part of a larger study regarding the various ways we advise students in their course selections, twenty-one Advanced Placement students were surveyed. When asked why they chose to take Advanced Placement courses, students' most common response was: to become better prepared for college (14 students). Nine said they sought college credit; nine wanted to challenge themselves; nine wanted to simply improve their skills. Five said they sought the camaraderie and improved discussion of an advanced course.

Responses indicate that most students (13) believe they themselves were responsible for making their enrollment decision. Parents were a distant second (5). Teachers and school guidance counselors were even less influential (3 and 4, respectively).

Most students who responded were taking at least two Advanced Placement courses. In fact, eight of the twenty-one were taking three or more AP courses! Yet, fully seventeen of the twenty-one respondents declared themselves to be satisfied with the choices they made. Only one regretted having signed up for AP.

Nine of the twenty-one students responding said they thought they were doing well in their AP subjects (3 English, 2 History, 2 Chemistry, 2 Calculus.) None thought he or she was doing poorly.

While teachers and guidance counselors reported concerns that ambitious students overload themselves with Advanced Placement classes, possibly resulting in

student burn-out or lack of follow-through in other commitments, students clearly disagree. They value autonomy in choosing their own workload, and they expect to achieve success according to the standards they set for themselves.

Any charge of elitism in grouping practices is certainly not substantiated by my surveys or interviews. Students were especially democratic in their views. No one complained that the inclusion of "less able" students interfered with his or her AP experience. The inclusion of unmotivated students elicited far greater concern.

Conclusion

Most students and educators express a willingness to err on the side of inclusion regarding student enrollment in Advanced Placement courses. As it now stands, our selection process is quite democratic. Students value the opportunity to make their own decision to challenge themselves in AP courses; and self-improvement is their chief motivation for taking AP.