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Myth 19: Is Advanced Placement an Adequate Program for Gifted Students?

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Is it a myth that Advanced Placement (AP) is an adequate program for gifted students? AP is so covered with myths and assumptions that it is hard to get a clear view of the issues. Let us find the answer about AP by looking at current realities.

Reality: AP is hard for gifted students to avoid. AP affects class rank through weighted grades. AP course taking, AP test scores, and AP class grades are three of the top 10 college admissions criteria (Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming, & Trapani, 2002; Espenshade, Hale and Chung, 2005). AP test scores of 4 or 5 can save time and money in college. Students know these realities: In 2008, 1.58 million teens took 2.74 million AP tests, including 264,480 ninth and tenth graders. More than 11,000 students took *six or more* AP exams (College Board, 2008).

Reality: AP never was a program *for* gifted students. From the start, the AP program was for colleges; early access to college credit was an incentive to encourage students to enroll in college. Students get credit, colleges get students, everyone benefits. Early AP literature was for and about gifted students because they were the college bound population. Today 75% of high school seniors continue to college. Reference to gifted students has disappeared from AP literature not because the program changed, but because college bound population changed.

Reality: AP is now integral to secondary education. AP gained popularity as gifted students earned college credits and principals started weighing grades to encourage higher enrollments. Ultimately, AP caught the attention of educators seeking a reliable pinnacle of high school achievement. Suddenly school quality was judged in part on the number of AP courses offered, the number of students enrolled in AP, and the number of students who passed the exam. Schools started using open enrollment policies for AP; any motivated student could sign up. Federal and state education agencies now make significant investments in AP:

- Thirty-seven state education policies mention AP by name; the Education Commission of the States provides guidelines to help write AP policy statements (Dounay, 2006).
- The “Access to High Standards” section of No Child Left Behind is devoted exclusively to AP.
- In 2008, the AP Incentive and Test Fee programs received \$43 million in federal subsidies, the Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act only received \$7.5 million. Federal money is supplemented locally by 47 states.

Reality: The pressure for open enrollment in AP classes has had mixed results. Based on head count alone, the number of students scoring 3, 4, and 5 on the AP test increases every year, suggesting that as the program expands it reaches additional capable students. However, the *proportion* of students scoring 3 or higher on AP tests has *decreased* steadily since 1987 (Texas Education Agency, 2006). This statistic has import for two reasons: First, students with scores of 3 or higher are known to have better chances of graduating from college than students who take an AP class, but not the test (Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Sadler & Tai, 2001). Second, it suggests that the number of students scoring 1 or 2 is increasing every year. A total of 41% of AP test scores in 2008 were a 1 or 2. Based on standards for scoring AP exams, 1 or 2 should be failing scores, but the College Board (2008) has obliquely suggested that a score of 1 or 2 might in fact be related to academic success. Between the students scoring 1 and 2 and the students who never take the exam, it seems a large proportion of students struggle in AP. Many factors undoubtedly contribute to this trend

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including lowered standards, inadequate student preparation, and hasty implementation.

Reality: AP is designed to provide traditional college courses, not best practice in gifted education. Accelerated college level content is the hallmark of an AP course. Although acceleration is an accepted form of differentiation (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004), no one recommends a steady diet of didactic instruction for gifted students. AP is not even a standout among models of accelerated learning, with an effect size comparable with other approaches (Rogers, 2004).

Lecturing is not *required* in AP; in theory, teachers are free to use different instructional strategies in an AP class. Preparation for free response questions does require analytical work, but teachers complain that the burden of content coverage minimizes chances for critical thinking (Hertberg-Davis, Callahan, & Kyburg, 2006). The tendency to lecture may be counterproductive: AP programs that incorporate best practice, including conceptual content organization, effective questioning (Henderson, Winitzky, & Kauchak, 1996), and problem solving (Husic, Linn, & Sloan, 1989) tend to have students with high test scores. AP courses are also more successful if some form of screening ensures that only prepared students enroll and if courses are taught by experienced teachers (Furry & Hecsh, 2001).

Reality: AP diminishes opportunity for original advanced courses. Gifted students need experience with the challenge of handling large quantities of disciplinary content; AP is clearly suited to that goal. That's not *all* gifted student need, yet the pressure to list numerous AP courses on college applications reduces opportunity for significant immersion in higher-order thinking, independent research, interdisciplinary study, field work, creative out-of-the-box thinking, or deep specialization all of which are considered essential to the coming workforce (Gallagher, 2008; Pink, 2006).

Overemphasis on the AP program also sends a troubling message to students and faculty: that the goal of education is a tangible reward instead of experience, exploration, awareness, discovery, or creativity. High schools with extensive commitments to AP have little room in the schedule to allow creative faculty to develop alternate forms of advanced curriculum. When honors courses are offered it is hard for them to compete with the system of rewards connected to AP. Original courses suffer the same fate as independent book stores and coffee shops when a chain moves in.

Is it a myth that AP is an adequate program for gifted students? For 50 years the College Board has offered one form of advanced study. It is often the only option available for gifted high school students. But uniqueness is not adequacy. If AP is used with gifted students, it should be held to the same standards as other gifted programs. AP *could* be adequate, if fast pace was combined with advanced instruction. AP *could* be adequate as one among many advanced courses. So teachers and administrators hold the final answer to the question of what AP *will* be for their gifted students, because as it stands AP is not inherently adequate for gifted students.

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