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Humanities

11 October 2024

Challenging the AP System: Financial Barriers and the Limits of Standardized Testing

The pressure to succeed in today's rigorous academic environment drives students to seek every advantage they get. This pursuit is seen in the advanced placement system that was designed to give high-achieving students an opportunity in high school to engage in college-level classwork. Through difficult classes and exams, students could potentially earn college credit while also strengthening their resumes and oftentimes pushing their limits. But, despite these opportunities, the AP system has faced criticism for creating disparities. So, although the advanced placement (AP) system provides opportunities for high-achieving students with college-level coursework, it is not the best model due to its standardization and bias towards more privileged students. A more flexible approach that encourages students to think critically and collaboratively while catering to a diverse range of learners can be a better method to serve the academic needs of advanced learners.

The AP program unevenly benefits students from wealthier schools that have more resources and neglects students in low-income schools who generally lack access to these opportunities, resulting in educational inequity. In wealthier districts, students are often given access to specialized AP preparation, including well-trained teachers and academic support which improves their performance on these exams. Many low-income schools do not have the means to offer more than one or two AP courses, leaving students with fewer opportunities to partake in college-level material. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, "only 58.2% of low-income schools offer AP courses, compared to 71.2% in wealthier areas" (Lee). This lack of access means that many talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds

are not only missing out on rigorous coursework but are as a result unable to earn college credit through these tests. This ends up placing them at a disadvantage in college admissions as “admission committees want to see that you are challenging yourself academically” (“What High School Classes Do Colleges Look For?”). Additionally, while some might argue that the standardized nature of the AP system makes sure that there is consistent fairness across schools, this assumption does not take into account the differences in access to resources that directly affect students’ ability to succeed. Supporters of standardization claim that having a uniform exam and curriculum provides an even playing field where all students can be assessed equally. However, when taking into consideration the differences in access to AP courses and exam preparation, there is a disparity. Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, states, “There’s no indication that this is leveling the playing field in those communities. The College Board approves the curriculum and there’s the common test at the end, but everything else is optional” (Donald). The "optional" nature of the AP system is mainly problematic because it allows for differences in how schools implement and support the curriculum. So while the curriculum and exams are standardized, there is no requirement for schools to provide proper teacher training or support systems for students while preparing to take the exam. In other words, the College Board has no control over whether the teachers who direct these AP level classes are doing an adequate job, therefore aiding in their students' success. This could be for a plethora of reasons, spanning from lack of funding in their school district which can lead to potentially less passionate teachers, or the fact that a school and household budget or income has a pivotal role in the materials that an individual is able to utilize. This causes students in low-income or rural schools to be at a disadvantage to their wealthier peers, further

emphasizing the educational inequalities faced across different schools because of the AP curriculum.

The AP system's reliance on standardized tests encourages students to have a narrow focus while preparing for tests. This limits students' abilities to engage in deeper critical thinking skills, as seen in the emphasis of memorization over exploration of topics. The structure of AP classes often forces students to prioritize "test-taking strategies over intellectual engagement" (Lee). The fast pacing of these courses, designed to cover a large amount of material before the exam date, leaves a minimum amount of time for in-depth exploration of topics or encouragement of creative problem-solving. As a result, students are more likely to focus on surface-level understanding in an effort to do well on exams, instead of mastering the material or making connections. Moreover, high-stakes testing environments like AP "pressure teachers to prioritize breadth over depth" (Lee). This not only restrains students' curiosity but also removes their ability to apply knowledge in real-world situations (Lee). The overemphasis on standardization limits the opportunities for students to think critically and creatively explore, ultimately affecting the development of skills that are needed for success in higher education beyond the scope of these exams. Thus, while the AP program aims to challenge students academically, its stringent focus on testing undermines the very intellectual growth that students need to thrive in the future.

While AP courses may push students toward academic achievement, they do so at the cost of forming an inclusive and cooperative educational environment. AP courses tend to be offered as advanced tracks within schools, leading to the creation of smaller, more specialized classes for high-performing students. These classes normally receive better resources, more experienced teachers, and greater academic attention, which creates a divide between AP and the

non-AP students. While this may seem beneficial in forming an environment of advanced academic individuals, it can lead to unintended consequences. The isolation of AP students from the other students can break opportunities for collaboration. As students are encouraged to compete individually for top grades and academic advantages, there is no time to create a sense of teamwork but rather an unintended emphasis on the number of AP's one might take. This competitive atmosphere contrasts with programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB), which emphasizes teamwork and the development of broader skills that go beyond academic achievement. One educator stated, "In IB, students are required to collaborate with their peers across different subjects and learn to think globally, focusing not only on personal achievement but on contributing to group success" (Smith, 2021). Overall this highlights the difference in the approach of the IB program compared to AP. In IB programs, collaboration and interdisciplinary learning are connected into the curriculum, making students not solely focused on their own academic success but are also actively engaged in teamwork. By prioritizing competition and individual success, the AP system can overlook the value of collaborative learning and the holistic development of students. As a result, the Advanced Placement (AP) program was created to provide academic challenges for high-achieving students, often resulting in the separation of these students from their peers.

Overall, while Advanced Placement was designed to give high-achieving students an opportunity to do college-level coursework and advance academically, it falls short of being the best model for students due to its standardization. The program's reliance on standardization results in disparities between wealthier and underfunded schools. Additionally, the competitive, individualistic nature of the AP program contrasts with more collaborative approaches like the

International Baccalaureate (IB) which stands for teamwork and holistic development. To better serve the advanced learners, a more flexible and inclusive approach is needed.

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