

# Advanced Placement Economics Improves Both Merit and Equity

Sally Meek and John Morton

In 1989, the **microeconomics** and macroeconomics examinations debuted on the Advanced Placement scene. At that time, many professors of economics were skeptical that college freshmen had the skills and maturity to understand the concepts in principles of economics courses. They thought teaching these concepts to high school students was even more ridiculous.

Nevertheless, 5,781 microeconomics and macroeconomics tests were administered in the initial year. Although the standards were deliberately set high, more than three in five students received a 3, 4, or 5, which are considered passing scores.<sup>1</sup> High school students *could* learn economics at the college level.

In 2007, 97,499 microeconomics and macroeconomics exams were administered, a nearly 17-fold increase in less than 20 years.<sup>2</sup> AP economics had arrived as a high school subject.

The AP economics tests reflect the content of college principles of microeconomics and macroeconomics courses. Contrary to the notion that any two economists have three different opinions, most college principles of economics courses are very similar. A successful AP economics course needs a college textbook and supplemental activities to make the concepts more concrete and relevant to high school students.

Has AP economics lived up to its expectations? Does it raise standards while still providing equity in education? We think the answer to both of these questions is a resounding “yes.”

## The Economic Way of Thinking

Although economics is sometimes

called “the dismal science,” it is really the social science of choice. Economics is more than a bundle of concepts; it is a way of thinking that helps students become more confident in their abilities and futures. Economic knowledge and skills equip students to make better choices that will help them to be more productive, competent, and empowered. Economics allows students to see that life is a positive-sum game. Merit joins equity in the economics classroom.

Economics students learn to think and make decisions using a marginal cost and marginal benefit analytical process. Although costs and benefits are different for each individual, economics teaches that actions have definite effects and it offers unique insights into the seemingly chaotic confusion of human behavior. Almost every aspect of human behavior can be analyzed using the economic approach. It is this distinctive approach—not a set of definite conclusions—that defines economics.

AP economics students learn the subject at a higher level than students in regular courses. Because AP economics has measurable results, teachers have an incentive to be well prepared to teach it. And the help is there. There are workshops, conferences, and summer

institutes that enhance teachers’ understanding of economic concepts and instructional strategies. AP economics teachers work side-by-side with Ph.D. economists at the reading and scoring of exams. This additional preparation increases the quality and rigor of all the economics classes they teach.

Students in economics courses that are not AP courses benefit from this improved quality of instruction, which may help explain why the first National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in economics concluded that 79 percent of high school students performed at the basic level and 42 percent performed at the proficient level or higher.<sup>3</sup> According to the data released, 16 percent of the sample took AP economics. Because AP teachers teach other economics courses, a much higher percentage of the students took economics from teachers trained to teach AP economics.

## AP Economics Prepares Students for College

Much of the research shows that AP economics and other AP subjects improve students’ performance in college. Here are some significant results:

- Breland and Oltman concluded that students who received college credit for AP economics performed as well or better in higher-level microeconomics and macroeconomics

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courses than students who had earned credit in the college introductory course.<sup>4</sup> Students who received a 5 performed better in intermediate economics courses than students who had taken the college introductory course. AP economics students with a 3 or 4 performed at about the same level in intermediate courses as students who took the introductory course in college.

- Morgan and Ramist studied data from 21 colleges and concluded that their research showed that the majority of students who were exempted from the introductory course because of their AP exam scores did at least as well or better in the subsequent course than those who took the introductory course.<sup>5</sup> This research also found that in second-level course grades, students with high scores on the AP exam on average outperformed their counterparts who took the introductory course.
- A University of Texas study showed similar results for AP-exempt students in subsequent courses.<sup>6</sup> The research also showed that AP-exempt students took as many or more class hours in the subject area and had the same or higher grades in additional courses in the subject area as compared to their non-AP counterparts.
- Studies in 1999 and 2006 by Adelman for the U.S. Department of Education found that the academic intensity of a student's high school curriculum was highly predictive of college completion.<sup>7</sup>
- Geiser and Santelices found that for students who took an AP exam, performance on the test followed only high school GPA as a predic-

tor of college grades.<sup>8</sup>

- Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian found that after controlling for other factors, students who earned a 3 or higher on one or more AP exams in the areas of English, mathematics, science or social studies were more likely to graduate from college in five years or less compared to non-AP students.<sup>9</sup>

### AP Economics Provides Feedback on School Success

The AP results provide feedback about how successful school and school system programs are. The results are measurable by student, teacher, and school. There are national standards for the exams. Results may be compared to national results in order to evaluate the preparation that a school provides for its students. Student results determine whether that student is prepared for an intermediate-level economics course. Each college makes this determination. In addition, teachers can assess the efficacy of their courses by determining their students' performance on specific objectives that were tested on the AP exam. School systems can evaluate their K-12 programs in order to determine if they are preparing students for a specific set of objectives for each AP course.

### AP Credit Saves Students Money

AP credit is the most inexpensive college credit that most students will acquire. Public schools provide textbooks for students, a cost that will be incurred in college. Many states pay for part of the cost of the exams. In Texas, for example, students pay approximately \$54 per exam, a savings of \$30 (the cost of each AP test is \$84), and students who have financial need pay \$5 per exam. Where else can a student acquire three college credit hours for \$5? In a time of rising tuition costs, AP credit can make college more affordable.

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## AP Economics Is Win-Win

Like economics itself, AP economics courses are a positive-sum game. Economics teaches important skills and shows students how to look for the most advantageous combination of costs and benefits. Equally important, AP economics prepares students for college, and a successful college experience is the key to higher earnings. At a time when American education is under attack for low standards and low scores on international tests, AP courses such as economics can lead the way for improving American international competitiveness. 

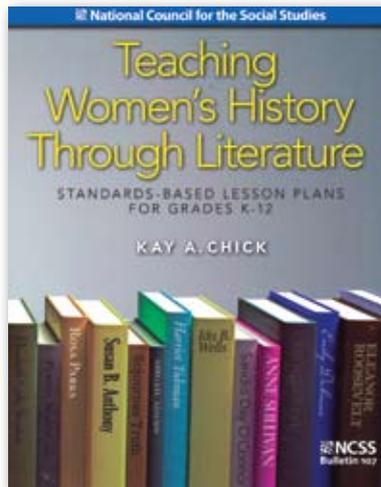
### Notes

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