

# Back to the Future: Merit or Equity in AP Social Studies?

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In an effort to address severe budget deficits at both the state and local levels, schools and educational programs are being asked to trim budgets. The Advanced Placement Program is one program that will certainly be scrutinized. The following observations and analysis of the AP program in social studies may help in the decision-making process.

Fifty years ago, Advanced Placement programs were created for a few elite students. In 2012, the College Board reported that more than 954,070 public high school graduates had taken at least one AP exam, and that 573,472 had a passing score of 3 or higher.<sup>1</sup> Most colleges award academic credit for a score of 3 out of a possible 5 on the exam. Yet, even as many schools are rushing to provide AP courses, others are quietly reducing them, “looking for ways to cut their students loose from curriculums that can cram in too much material at the expense of conceptual understanding and from the pressure to amass as many AP grades on their transcript as possible.”<sup>2</sup> Due to the large increase in students participating in AP programs, many elite schools have become skeptical of quality. Harvard, for example, only accepts a score of 5.

Many high school students use AP courses to strengthen their college applications and complete their degree requirements in an efficient way. However, a report by the National Academy of Sciences has pointed to a large variation in the quality and effectiveness of AP classes, noting “problems with curriculum, instructional methods, teacher preparation, and professional development.” The report also observes that “a lack of access to high quality AP teachers (those with strong content knowledge and pedagogical skills) may preclude some students, especially minorities and those living in poverty, from pursuing advanced study in high school.”<sup>3</sup>

The College Board’s 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation affirms that “States have made great strides in recent years in closing equity gaps for underserved minority and low-income students, but these students remain underrepresented in AP classrooms and in the population of students scoring 3 or higher on AP exams.”<sup>4</sup>

Conventional wisdom has insisted that good scores on the AP exams are a predictor of college success. However, Trina Thompson and James O. Rust report that “based on the present sample of high achieving students, there is no reason to conclude that taking AP classes in high school results in higher GPAs in college.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, this is due in part to the increased access to AP courses offered by high schools, as enrollments in those courses now include students with a wider range of abilities than was previously the case.

Following is a general overview of AP social studies and a brief history of the AP social studies program. In writing a comprehensive analysis of the AP programs, Eric Rothschild attempts to show a relationship between the evolution of AP programs and various educational reform movements.<sup>6</sup> A discussion of AP programs would be remiss without addressing the troubling issue of the achievement gap. Finally, we want to address the issue of selection criteria; should participation be based upon merit (intellectual rigor) or equity (allowing any student to enroll in AP courses)?

## History of AP programs

With the Cold War in progress and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, many felt “the upgrading of American education was a matter of survival in a death struggle with Communism. We needed engineers and scientists and people of talent in all areas if America was to see another century.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1951, Gordon Keith Chalmers, president of Kenyon College, and the faculty of that school initiated discussions with 11 colleges (Bowdoin, Brown, Carleton, Haverford, Kenyon, M.I.T., Middlebury, Swarthmore, Wabash, Wesleyan, and Williams) about the optimum length of the undergraduate experience and requirements for graduation. This initial group invited 12 headmasters, principals, and superintendents to a planning session in 1952 in which they agreed to the following principles:

...that admission to college with advanced standing at the normal college-entering age after high school graduation is more desirable, for many reasons, than acceleration of able students out of high school at age 15 ½ or 16 and that the advancement of American education demands the strengthening of secondary schools, especially in those divisions in which the ablest students are enrolled, and that colleges can and should give a vote of confidence and encouragement to secondary schools that try to establish and maintain high standards of academic achievement.<sup>8</sup>

During the same time period, another group convened which consisted of three

independent schools (Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville) and three research universities (Harvard, Princeton, and Yale), and was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation. What this committee was attempting to do and what was so unusual was “nothing less than an attempt to restore a ‘wholeness’ or ‘unity’ to educational experience that was perceived to be endangered and under threat of coming apart.”<sup>9</sup> During the 1950s, surveys were taken that suggested that the grades between 11–14, from the junior year in high school through the sophomore year in college, were largely vacant of intellectual purpose and interest; “Instead, they found them full of ‘barren work’ and ‘sheer repetition.’”<sup>10</sup>

The committee made the following recommendations: “(a) unite student work in school and college; (b) create an intellectual progression across grades 11–14; (c) connect and integrate course development in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities; and (d) support and give effect to a shared conception of the meaning of a liberal education.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of a unity between grades 11–14 seems particularly relevant today as schools create partnerships in P-16 configurations.

As AP programs evolved during the 1960s, they were confronted by the social and political realities of the times. A generation of student political activism took root. Not only did students challenge the concept of grading; more importantly they demanded a more democratic education.<sup>12</sup> “Top-flight American education had always been elitist, and the democratic trends of the sixties called for better education for the many, rather than the best education for the few.”<sup>13</sup> Examinations which were perceived to prevent social mobility or restrict minimum access to higher education were suspect. The AP examinations did not resonate well with the generation of students with flowers in their hair.

The seemingly compatible goals of equity and merit began to fracture. In response to a historical pattern of segregation, schools began to adopt open

enrollment admissions policies. Colleges adopted affirmative action admissions programs and initiatives designed to assist in minority faculty recruitment. Critics of these programs argued that they violated the basic principles of academic merit. A number of supporters of the programs accused the College Board and the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administered the SAT and Merit Scholarship examinations, of using racially discriminatory instruments.

This decade also saw significant changes in the format of the exams. Prior to 1973, U.S. History AP students were asked to respond to three out of ten essay questions. Now they were asked to respond to two out of nine questions and a Document Based Question (DBQ). The DBQ consists of primary source documents, political cartoons, graphs, photographs, etc., and asks students to analyze a particular period or event in American history. “Bright students loved the challenge, in large part because they were asked to do what historians do.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, and *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* by Ernest L. Boyer set off alarms about the third decade of AP programs.<sup>15</sup> Test scores declined despite the popularity of the program. “In 1976, 75,651 students took 98,898 examinations; in 1985, a total of 205,650 students took 280,972 exams.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the exuberance of students a decade earlier, this generation confronted the sobering economic challenges of “stagflation” in the late 1970s and a recession in the early 1980s. Student anxiety was high and the opportunities for college among students with limited resources were worrisome. For many students, getting credit for the AP reduced their financial burden.

During the 1990s, a major ground shift occurred with AP programs. State governments and local foundations embraced the concept of AP programs for students. States began to support the costs of AP examinations. “The effect was predictable. When states began to

pay the costs of AP exams, the number of students taking the exams jumped by sixty to eighty percent.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, by 1993, 17 states funded teacher attendance at Advanced Placement summer institutes. In 1986, 7,201 schools participated in AP programs; by 1997, the number had jumped to 11,500. By 1995, AP had 29 courses and examinations in place. In AP social studies, American Government and Comparative Government were added in 1987; Economics, both macro- and micro-, soon followed in 1989, and Psychology in 1992. In 2001, AP Human Geography administered its first test to 3,272 students and by 2005 increased them to 14,139. As of this writing, there are 34 AP examinations given each year, 10 of which are AP social studies examinations.

### Advanced Placement Social Studies Examinations

Art History	Microeconomics
Comparative Government & Politics	Psychology
European History	U.S. Government & Politics
Human Geography	U.S. History
Macroeconomics	World History

As Rothschild reports, “by the mid-1990s, half of the nation’s high schools were participating in the Advanced Placement Program.”<sup>18</sup> The number of students completing the exams doubled between 1987 and 1994; approximately 11 out of 100 high school juniors and seniors had taken the exams. More recently, during the last decade, the number of public high school graduates who had taken at least one AP exam rose from 471,404 in 2002 to 954,070 in 2012.<sup>19</sup> What had once been a program that had been initiated by elite preparatory schools and colleges in the East was now well received among public schools throughout the country.

The Table shows the varying success rates (grades of 3 or higher) in social studies AP subjects among graduating public high school students in 2012. The success

rates in AP social studies are similar to those in AP math and science, but less than the success rates for AP arts and languages.<sup>20</sup> The lowest success rate in social studies is in World History (which is commonly taken by students in their sophomore year) and the highest success rate is in Psychology.

### The Achievement Gap

In spite of the fact that many more students have access to AP programs today than in the past, a troubling problem still continues: African Americans and Hispanics do less well than their white counterparts. “Underserved minorities appear to be disproportionately impacted: 74 percent of American/Alaska Native students, 80 percent of black/African American, and 70 percent of Hispanic/Latino students did not take the recommended AP subject.”<sup>21</sup>

Test scores of students who take the AP examinations raise some vexing educational concerns. Among those who take examinations, only 1 in 10 students in urban schools score a 3 or higher, compared to 6 in 10 in suburban schools. One of the most troubling aspects of American education has long been an intractable achievement gap, with white students outpacing minority students in academic performance. One can argue this disparity exists because of socioeconomic differences and a system of tracking that has prevented disadvantaged groups from achieving academic success. “Despite strides that have been made by educators to expand the access to AP, the data indicate that traditionally underserved minority students are not always receiving adequate preparation for the rigors of college-level course work.”<sup>22</sup> The performance of African American students on many of the AP exams is similar to their performance in the other subjects, but when compared to whites, black students’ scores remain significantly lower. On the other hand, Hispanic students have made significant progress, though this is aided by the fact that the most popular AP exam among Hispanic students is the AP in Spanish

Table: Social Studies AP Exam Results for the Class of 2012\*

Subject	% of Students Scoring 2 or Less	% of Students Scoring 3 or More
Art History	42.8	57.2
Comparative Government and Politics	41.1	59
European History	36.5	53.5
Human Geography	49.0	51.0
Macroeconomics	47.0	53.0
Microeconomics	37.3	62.7
Psychology	34.3	65.6
U.S. Government and politics	49.6	50.4
U.S. History	49.4	50.6
World History	51.9	48.1

\*The statistics show the proportion of students from the high school class of 2012 who scored above 3 (the passing grade) in the social studies AP exams compared to those who scored 2 or less. Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to exactly 100%. Source: College Board, *The 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation* (February 13, 2013): p. 27, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/9th-annual/9th-annual-ap-report-double-page.pdf>.

language. In 2012, 18.3% of high school graduates were Hispanic. Of graduating students who had received a 3 or better on an AP exam, Hispanics comprised 15.9% of the group.<sup>23</sup>

African American students are the most underrepresented group among AP exam takers. They comprised 14.5% of the total number of public high school graduates in 2012, but were only 9.2% of those who had taken an AP exam, and only 4.4% of those who had obtained a score of 3 or better. In contrast, white students were 58.5% of the total number of public high school graduates, and were 56.4% of those who had taken at least one AP exam. They constituted 61.9% of students who had scored 3 or higher on an AP exam.<sup>24</sup>

The underlying disparity in test scores among minorities and poor students results from a history of underfunded educational programs at the Pre-K and elementary levels. In spite of remediation and intervention programs, students who enter high school unprepared will not achieve success on AP examinations. Robert Tai reminds us that using Advanced Placement programs as a means of achieving educational equity is similar to the approach taken by proponents of Affirmative Action. Stanley Arnowitz argued that “affirmative action, ... has distracted the public from addressing

the true problem: festering educational inequities.”<sup>25</sup>

A common misconception held by many teachers is that the problem of low-achieving minority and immigrant students is limited to low-income urban areas. “More minority students attend suburban schools than popularly believed; in 2000, 33 percent of African American children, 45 percent of Hispanic children and 54 percent of Asian children lived in suburban areas, and they attended both poor, segregated schools and excellent racially integrated schools with many resources.”<sup>26</sup>

Two recent studies can help us understand the achievement gap in suburban schools. Ronald Ferguson, of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, analyzed data collected by the Minority Student Achievement Network. In order to understand the experiences of different racial and economic groups, the Network surveyed 95 schools in 15 school districts using the “Ed-Excel Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture” developed by John Bishop of Cornell University. In the other study, the late John Ogbu attempted “to determine how the identity of African American students as an oppressed group outside the opportunity structure affects their academic achievement specifically and their school experience more gener-

Students from Copiague High School are photographed in an Advanced Placement classroom in Copiague, New York, 2012.

(Courtesy of the College Board)



ally.” Both researchers garnered similar results, though different in emphasis. “For Ferguson, the role of the teacher and the school is to encourage the individual student to meet the demands of academic work by changing classroom practices. For Ogbu, students will perform better and be more engaged in school if they are helped to modify parts of their collective identity that reject school success, through caring individual and institutional practices.”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, we must invite all students into our classroom, expect high standards, and treat them with respect, following recommendations both researchers suggest. “Because students value and respond to encouragement, teachers need to provide it routinely”<sup>28</sup> and “teachers need to recognize that their expectations have an effect on their students’ concept of themselves as learners and achievers and the internalization of negative or positive beliefs about their intelligence.”<sup>29</sup> Educational disparity may be more a result of teachers’ attitudes and the pervasive influence of a history of segregation than of the intellectual differences ascribed by some. Students who have excellent teachers and adequate resources do indeed have a better chance for success. Who then is selected and on what basis should enrollment be allowed in an advanced placement course of study?

### Selection: Merit or Equity?

The issue of who enrolls in Advanced Placement courses has always been problematic. “Upon what basis do we discriminate among the intellects of our

democratic fellows, whether for purposes of college admission, employment, or even social status? Who should have access to what kinds of education? And, how do we prepare worthy citizens, and what should the role of the school be in the wider *polis*?” asks Michael C. Johaneck.<sup>30</sup>

From the inception of the AP program, schools have used different selection criteria, perhaps because of our insistence on local autonomy. In some communities, parents have been sent invitations; in others, student selection was made by department heads based on IQ scores and reviewed by guidance counselors. Today, many schools no longer require any type of selection criteria to be used for AP courses. Ironically, less distinguished high schools have an open enrollment policy for AP courses while the more academically rigorous schools expect high grades and teacher recommendations to enroll in AP courses.

In spite of these discrepancies, college admission officers still rely on AP courses as one of many criteria for selection. In a period of severe budget cuts, will AP programs survive and if so who will be allowed or selected to participate? This question will force many school districts to choose between two fundamental values: merit (Jefferson’s meritocracy) or equity (fulfillment of the American Dream). 🌐

### Notes

1. The College Board, *The 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation* (February 13, 2013): 16, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/9th-annual/9th-annual-ap-report-double-page.pdf>.
2. Tamar Lewin: “The Two Faces of A.P.,” *The New York Times* (January 8, 2006): E1.

3. Margaret A. Ray, *Advancing Learning in AP Economics*, National Academy of Social Sciences: 1, [www.umw.edu/cas/fipse/docs/advancing\\_learning\\_in\\_ap\\_e.pdf](http://www.umw.edu/cas/fipse/docs/advancing_learning_in_ap_e.pdf).
4. College Board, *The 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation*: 20.
5. Trina Thompson and James O. Rust, “Follow-up of Advanced Placement Students in College,” *College Student Journal* 41 (June 1, 2007): 3.
6. Eric Rothschild, “Four Decades of the Advanced Placement Program,” *The History Teacher* 32, no. 2 (1999): 175-206. Also see: [www.andover.edu/GPGConference/Documents/Four-Decades.pdf](http://www.andover.edu/GPGConference/Documents/Four-Decades.pdf).
7. Rothschild, 176.
8. *Ibid.*, 178.
9. Bob Orrill, *Grades 11-14: The Heartland or Wasteland of American Education?*, Unpublished paper, Woodrow Wilson Institute, Washington, DC (2000): 3., [www.earlycolleges.org/Downloads/Heartland.pdf](http://www.earlycolleges.org/Downloads/Heartland.pdf).
10. *Ibid.*, 5.
11. *Ibid.*, 6.
12. Rothschild, 185.
13. *Ibid.*, 185.
14. *Ibid.*, 187.
15. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1983); Ernest Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).
16. Rothschild, 189.
17. *Ibid.*, 195.
18. *Ibid.*, 197.
19. The College Board, *The 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation*: 16.
20. *Ibid.*, 27.
21. College Board, *The 8th Annual Report to the Nation* (February 8, 2012): 17.
22. The College Board. *The 7th Annual Report to the Nation* (New York: The College Board, February 9, 2011): 8.
23. The College Board, *The 9th Annual AP Report to the Nation*: 20, 25.
24. *Ibid.*, 20.
25. Robert H. Tai. “Posing Tougher Questions about the Advanced Placement Program,” *Liberal Education* 94, no.3, (Summer 2008): 42. See [www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-su08/documents/LE-SU08\\_Tai.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-su08/documents/LE-SU08_Tai.pdf).
26. Erwin Flaxman, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Two Views from Current Research*, ERIC: ED482919, 2003-12-00, [www.ericdigests.org/2004-3/gap.html](http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-3/gap.html)
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Michael C. Johaneck, *A Faithful Mirror: Reflections of the College Board and Education in America* (N.Y.: The College Board, 2001): ix.

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