

# Building an AP Social Studies Program with Non-Traditional AP Students

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In 1848, Horace Mann declared that “such a thing never did happen, and never can happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of men should be permanently poor.” If there is any article of faith in American Education, it is that. Equal access to education—to a high quality education—is the only thing that makes a meritocracy plausible. Access to a high quality education has increasingly come to mean access to an Advanced Placement program. In recent years, there has been steady attention paid to opening access to AP programs. The 9th annual College Board report (2013) stated “students who succeed on an AP Exam during high school typically experience greater overall academic success in college, and are more likely than their non-AP peers to graduate from college and to graduate on time.” Many high-school rating indexes (*US News and World Report*, *The Washington Post*, or *Newsweek/Daily Beast*) use AP participation and results as central metrics of school success. College Board officially—and enthusiastically—recommends and supports open access programs, and dedicates a significant portion of its annual report to tracking increased access to and success in AP classes.

An AP program is a wonderful way to provide at-risk students with critical tools for success in education. However, building a successful AP program in a school that has never had one can be daunting. The College Board Annual Report focuses on students who have “a high likelihood of success in AP” who “did not take any recommended AP Exam.” In many struggling schools, there may be very few students who reach that bar; however, successful programs can be built even in struggling schools where most students lack basic skills, support, or educational background.

It is important not to measure the success of an AP program by the percentage scoring “3” or higher. No student deserves less education because he or she is a threat to a statistic. If a program adds 20 students in a year, and two of

them score a 3, the program has grown in two ways.

It is most useful to think of a developing AP program as one that grows each year along three axes:

- The number of students taking the class and the test;
- The number of students achieving a score of 3, 4, or 5 on the test;
- The representation of non-traditional groups at a school (for example, low-SES, minority, LEP, or special education populations).

Each is an independent factor, and for a program to be growing, all three ought to be trending upward in the long run. Steady growth of the program—not just the discovery of a handful of high-achievers each year—should be the goal.

## Teaching the Non-traditional Student

The term “non-traditional student” covers a wide swath. It usually includes minority groups that are under-represented nationally in AP courses and exams. But it also includes students from non-English speaking households, students on free or reduced lunch, students whose parents have little education, as well as students who have learning disabilities. There is a great deal of overlap within these groups; and while their challenges may be different, similar strategies will often work. Very often students who do not fit into the traditional mode can be successful in an AP course and on an AP exam if they are encouraged and supported.

Perhaps the most common factor keeping a non-traditional student from success is poverty. An aware and supportive teacher can work to insure that this is not an obstacle. For students who cannot afford to buy outside books, study guides, or materials for projects, the teacher might select outside readings and projects that are free or very inexpensive. Many students may not have even \$5 to contribute to a school assignment. For expenses that simply cannot be eliminated (such as exam fees), it is vital that students be given time to save. Start talking about exam fees before Christmas. Even students that are not on free or reduced lunch may have real financial difficulties and may have a great

deal of trouble producing a check for \$300+ for a series of exams. Students who know about a reading list or exam fees can plan ahead.

Poverty has other subtle effects. Students who work long hours to pay household bills do not have a great deal of time or energy for homework. Crowded living conditions make completing long-term projects difficult. Even students who do not have jobs—or who work only on weekends—often have daily household or childcare responsibilities. Internet and printer access is far from universal, and while public or school library computers may be available, that does not mean this is always practical. While one cannot construct a successful AP course that does not require any homework, Internet access, or projects, it is vital to be mindful of these limitations and mitigate them when possible.

Many non-traditional students may also live in an environment that is not supportive of academic success. Language issues persist. Academic vocabulary lags behind colloquial speech. Idioms are a challenge. Archaic English in primary sources requires explicit instruction. Providing vocabulary support—especially on instructions and feedback—is crucial. Students need to have various avenues to seek clarification when confused over vocabulary and should feel comfortable seeking that additional help.

Parents of non-traditional students may not comprehend the nature of AP programs, the excessive workload and time commitment, and as a result may not be supportive or may pull their student from the course. They may see a student's grades drop and may take that as indicative of student failure. Schools, the district, and teachers need to educate parents and students about the value of AP courses. In reality, the teacher bears the larger burden here.

Identity issues may also discourage non-traditional students from taking an AP course. This pressure is both internal and external. External pressure

might include students being hassled by peers about taking a “smart kids’ class” or a “rich kids’ class,” but internal pressure is a greater problem. It is difficult for adolescents to go somewhere they are not sure they belong and where they think there is a good chance they will make a fool of themselves. It is especially challenging to take that sort of risk when one has an alternate environment that is comfortable. When teachers only address the external pressure—“Don’t listen to your friends!”—students feel defensive, not empowered. It’s important to respect and diffuse the fear and discomfort students feel. Recruiting a cadre of non-traditional students provides students with an instant support group.

Many students, even those who perform poorly on the PSAT, have the potential to be successful in an AP course; however, they may lack the basic skills, the background knowledge, the fundamental attitude, or even the basic desire. These are often not the students that inspire their teacher. They are not the ones that have been waiting for someone to show them the way. However, if a course is pitched only at those who are ready, the program will not grow: at best, it will be a huddled group, a school within a school, a bright spot in a dim environment. A skilled, determined, and flexible teacher can take students who are not completely ready and move them toward success in the class, on the exam, and in college. How to move them forward is the question.

### **Practical Support**

Structure and predictability are the most important elements a teacher in a non-traditional classroom can provide. Students with significant, non-flexible, out-of-class time constraints are disproportionately impacted by moving deadlines, shifting quiz dates, irregular make-up work policies, inconsistent grading, and short lead times on homework, tests, and projects. When students and teacher share a cultural

background, there are often cues about what is a “rule” and what is a “guideline” that non-traditional students miss. Students should be provided with a written calendar or other list of due dates, and these should be reliable. Activities like tutoring times need to be posted and consistent; classroom procedures need to be consistent and unambiguous. The non-traditional student often feels like an outsider in class. Knowing how the environment works—and being able to depend on that knowledge—fosters a sense of belonging.

Explicit instructions are a vital component of this structure. Students who have not been immersed in the conventions of advanced academic instruction cannot be expected to intuit things that may seem obvious. They cannot differentiate between an assignment designed to assess content knowledge and one requiring analysis. Non-traditional students may miss that sub-text and spend a great deal of effort on non-productive tasks without accomplishing the productive goals.

Non-traditional students often lack time management skills. While they may be extremely busy with outside responsibilities, many of those responsibilities are externally imposed: they are given a schedule and have no flexibility. Those responsibilities tend to be time-based (work 4 hours), not task based (read 30 pages and fill out this chart). Students may be poor estimators of how much time a task will or should take. Furthermore, as previously discussed, non-traditional students may have little perspective about how much work an assignment is designed to represent. This leads to either underestimating the task and thus receiving a poor grade or overestimating the enormity of the task and quitting. The students need explicit instruction and description, especially early in the year, so that they can learn to manage their time intelligently.

All of these issues often culminate in summer assignments, projects, or other alternative assessments. Teachers often include such assignments as a way to

support struggling students, but are dismayed when these students turn in work that is far below expectations, or do not turn in the assignment at all. Some very practical ways a teacher can help a non-traditional student on these sorts of assessments are:

- Provide examples of completed work. An example—or several examples—is worth a thousand handouts.
- Break the project into chronological steps as part of the instructions. For each step, teachers ought to include what needs to be done, how to do it, and how much time (roughly) it should take.
- Include mandatory mid-point project checks, especially early in the year.
- Provide scheduled, designated tutoring times for students to come in for additional help. Students should be encouraged to bring in what they have already done to be checked over. Teachers need to offer help with basic research and writing skills.
- Use a clear rubric that is provided to the students in advance so that they can self-grade their own work. This allows the student to look at the project through the teacher’s eyes, and looking at the self-grading can help the teacher identify where expectations and instructions were not clear.
- Assess according to what was assigned. Few things are as disheartening to students presenting what they thought was a solid piece of work only to lose credit for something they did not realize was important.

In addition to providing structure and consistency, the teacher in a non-traditional program needs to calibrate expectations. Well-intentioned teachers often confuse “high expectations” with “skipping the fundamentals” because they expect students to master the basics

independently and jump ahead to more complex material. Instead of meeting the challenge, students who lag behind on simple skills and knowledge feel out of their depth from the start. Students who feel lost in early days reason that there is no chance they can stay the course. A better strategy is to assume very little in terms of background knowledge or fundamental skills, but to move through teaching those things at a steady, unrelenting pace and to provide out-of-class opportunities for a student to remediate areas that may still be lacking. When these basics are taught, students feel confident and move forward more independently into the advanced material.

Unprepared and under-prepared students also need very basic support in study skills, note taking, writing, and test taking. One should not have “high expectations” about simple techniques—like how to use flash cards, how to start a paragraph, how to use homework or notes to study, or how to organize materials and connect information. Writing is a particular area of concern: each social studies test has different requirements for free responses and students will only master a particular approach when given explicit instructions as well as examples of successful writing to model, and opportunities to practice. It is useful here to work with the English department to standardize technical vocabulary, but it remains vital that students be prepared for a particular type of free-response.

Teachers should have reasonable expectations for what they can cover in a year. There is always more to say, and more to discuss. But time is limited. This is especially true in a developing program, when a great deal of time may need to be dedicated to basic skills and background knowledge, leaving less for enrichment. One important tool is the AP outline available for each course. That is the spine of the course. Additional topics may well be introduced to support or deepen student engagement or understanding, but the teacher needs to be deliberate and not attempt to teach the entirety of the textbook.

But while teachers should have low expectations for where their students start and reasonable expectations for what the course can cover, they should have high expectations for where students will end up. The simple fact of AP exams is that they are very difficult tests that do not require a perfect performance to do well. When a teacher looks at released tests—especially the released free-response—it is tempting to look at the response with the mid-range score and then orient the class to that goal. However, non-traditional students are capable of performing at high levels, and it is always a better strategy to push toward advanced analysis. A student who attempts advanced analysis and fails, will fall right back into that middle ground. A talented, hard-working teacher who aims at the middle gets a stagnant program with a handful of threes, a great many twos, and more ones than they like. Growth only happens if the door is open for success.

Furthermore, teachers need to have high expectations for student understanding. When working with students who have not been previously successful in advanced academics, it is tempting to swap out the more complex task of understanding for the simpler task of memorizing. This is a poor strategy. Students without extensive background and foundational knowledge are poor at memorizing because they are memorizing without context. It is the student with a solid contextual background who can readily memorize additional details. Furthermore, memorization of past tests will not carry them through the one they actually take: College Board tests require the ability to apply understanding to new situations. Throughout the course, the teacher must lead the students to make connections, see patterns, and categorize information.

In addition to high expectations for student learning, teachers in non-traditional programs need to have high expectations for student effort. Non-traditional students will work hard if they know what to do, and if they believe that work will

lead to results. Advanced Placement classes are not easy, and require a great deal of effort on the part of the students. The most unlikely students will read, do homework, and come for tutoring if the expectation that they do so is made clear and if they understand the purpose of the work.

### Psychological Support

Non-traditional students need psychological as well as practical support. They need to feel confident that they belong in the class and that success is feasible. It is tempting to oversell how difficult and challenging AP classes are. For every student who is inspired by such a challenge, several others slip out the back door. The teacher’s attitude can modify this.

Students need to believe they can succeed. They need to be told regularly—weekly, sometimes daily—that with sustained effort they can succeed in the course. Students who are fairly confident that they will earn a 3 will study in hopes of earning a 4 or 5.

Students need to believe that sustained, focused work is standard. Borderline students often convince themselves that a lack of effort is normal. This misperception has to be stamped out. The teacher must convey the assumption that everyone does the reading, the homework, and studies. A teacher must create the expectation that major projects get turned in on time—perhaps handing out funky stickers, or carrying out other types of recognition for students who do hand in projects on time. It is useful to pass homework back in class, instead of letting students retrieve it, because it demonstrates that most people do their work. Asking a student in the hall, “Did you study last night?” reinforces the principle for everyone in earshot that nightly studying is expected.

Students need to believe they are noticed. Attention is the most effective form of encouragement. Students assume that essays are not really read, homework grades are assigned with a glance, and that the teacher only really knows the names of the students who

assert themselves. This is especially acute for non-traditional students. This can be countered by positive attention. It is especially useful to show that academic growth or potential has been noticed, but pointing out new shoes makes an impression as well. In terms of academics, complimenting behavior and effort is often more productive than complimenting innate talent.

As in all classes, the attitude and behavior of the teacher can make a world of difference. Consider the impact of the following phrases when dealing with the non-traditional AP student:

- “Some of you ...”—The student who really needs the reprimand will assume it wasn’t meant for him or her; the struggling student will take it to heart unnecessarily.
- “They just don’t get my jokes”—An attempt to tease, which might work when the student and teacher come from the same background, can often backfire. At best, the students may not understand the humor; at worst, they may be insulted and quit.
- “They’re the ones who ...”—While the ultimate responsibility for success does lie with the student, accepting the students where they are—in terms of motivation and dedication as well as academics—is essential for success with the non-traditional student. Teachers must believe that they are capable of inspiring their students.
- “It’s a college course!”—No, it isn’t. It is college level material being taught to high school students. They need guidance, support, and comfort.
- “I don’t want to hear excuses ...”—What is equal is not always fair; what is fair is not always equal. Keeping a balance between consistency and flexibility is essential.

### Conclusion

Building an AP program in a school with very few well-prepared students can feel like the labor of Sisyphus: every May that rock finally reaches the top of

the hill, and every July it seems to roll right back down. It requires an almost inhuman ability to emotionally invest in and be dedicated to developing that potential. It demands a paradox: one has to both take total responsibility for student performance while fostering that same sense of total responsibility in the students themselves. It takes creativity and flexibility of thinking and a willingness to try. It takes towering faith in the students’ ability to succeed, often despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. But if one is prepared for all that, it is the best job on Earth as students see that they are more than they thought they were. 🌍

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