

THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM—AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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What are known today as Advanced Placement courses and examinations began in the 1950s as an initiative at a handful of elite secondary schools (you could guess them instantly), supported by a handful of highly selective colleges (you could guess them, too). First developed under the auspices of the (not E. E.) Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education, the original idea was unabashedly to support the most able students in getting a running start at college curricula, and it was successful. By the 1960s it had spread to more high schools—mainly “top tier” independent schools and some of the wealthier public districts—and the program had been taken over by the College Board.

In the 1980s, as the freewheeling Seventies faded and a decade of drugs, latch-key kids, shifts to coeducation, and dress-code erosion drew to a close, many independent schools found themselves with reputations damaged and in dire economic straits. Incorporating AP-designated courses was part of the standard consultant prescription for repairing this damage, and schools began offering these as a way of demonstrating their academic bona fides. Sprinkling these two letters around a course guide seemed to reassure prospective families and students, and the idea of teaching to a “college level” test seemed like reasonable medicine when enrollment shrinkage was the alternative.

At the same time, AP “programs” in the public high schools of many upper- and upper-middle-class communities proliferated, creating a brand that combined a stamp of academic quality—AP courses tended to be a school's most difficult and often featured anomalously small classes of hand-picked students taught by senior faculty—with a reputation for “rigor”; Advanced Placement courses were hard, and the single meaningful assessment in these courses, a three-hour examinations given in early May, was often notable for the amount of rote memorization and by-the-book responses they required. As public schools provided more and more Advanced Placement-designated courses, the greater the pressure on independent schools to expand their own offerings.

(Today many affluent suburban school districts still trade on their best students’—in most cases classes whose enrollment is carefully winnowed to ensure success—high AP test scores, and everything from property tax rates to teacher salaries to real estate prices in these communities in some way ride upon the high school's thriving AP program and the ability of its teachers to consistently reap a harvest of high test scores—3s, 4s, and 5s—year in, year out. Within such schools, pressure also increases on the most able and ambitious students to take more and more AP-designated courses; gladiators performing inadvertently for the glory of their school and community, these students can also be caught up in a treadmill that starts with AP classes as early as ninth grade with a program of high-school study dictated not by student interest but by strategy. This situation also obtains in many independent schools, where students often feel driven by the perceived imperative from colleges to take only the “most rigorous” courses, and AP-designated classes tend to be the standard here. To be sure, this is a situation not of the Advanced Placement program's making.)

The 1988 film *Stand and Deliver* solidified the notion that a good AP examination score could be the ticket to a major academic upgrade just as it also valorized a particular kind of teaching—both stand-and-deliver lecturing and the image of the successful educator as a Marine drill sergeant with a heart of gold. It is less noted that the film also confirmed the idea that success on these tests was generally the province of middle class white students; the whole *premise* of the film is that the College Board



did not believe that Latino students from inner city Los Angeles could do well on the examinations without cheating.

The belief in Advanced Placement as a kind of gold standard has fueled the growth of the program and the College Board's influence on curriculum and pedagogy. An "AP program" has become a proxy for a school's academic quality in the public mind, from affluent cocktail party circuits to families desperate for admission to urban magnet and charter schools.

In our own century the AP program has grown dramatically, primarily as a way for new schools—charters, magnet schools, and some private schools—to establish "academic cred" and as a relatively low-cost way for smaller and less affluent public school districts, urban and rural, to do the same. In about 2006 the College Board began to audit schools' Advanced Placement-designated curricula to ensure quality control in a move that was expressly aimed at protecting the "AP" trademark from dilution by shoddy programs in schools that offered "AP courses" but whose students fared poorly on—or didn't take—AP examinations.

The AP-as-quality-proxy has also infused efforts to rank schools nationally, notably the initiative led by Jay Mathews at the *Washington Post* begun about twenty years ago. An education reporter who had long expressed a broad and deep interest in and appreciation for many approaches to curriculum and assessment, Mathews at first hitched his wagon to the Advanced Placement star by using AP-derived student success measures—number of students taking examinations and overall scores—as the chief metric for his national high school ranking system, now incarnated as the *Washington Post* Challenge Index. (In [a 2017 column](#) for the *Post*, Mathews expressed concern about the over-emphasis on test scores in ranking systems.)

It is perhaps telling that of the top ten schools on the current Challenge Index, only a handful were founded before the current century; there is only one more-or-less traditional comprehensive public high school (at #9). As Jonathan Martin has suggested in his short, must-read publication for The Enrollment Management, "[Sizing Up the Competition](#)" (downloadable), there is a segment of the "new schools" movement that is expressly aimed at attracting customers by offering demanding programs that are heavily focused on "academic rigor" at the expense of extracurriculars and "character education." In these schools Advanced Placement-designated courses, or alternatively the International Baccalaureate program, are the absolute gold standard, and many of these schools are undeniably successful at attracting ambitious families and their able children.

So far you may have read little in this report that offers any correspondence between the academic quality of Advanced Placement courses—which clearly have taken their collective place as a proxy for academic quality—and the actual or at least purported value proposition of the school in which you work. Since the early 2000s some four dozen or so independent schools—some of them market leaders in metropolitan areas—have stepped away from offering Advanced Placement-designated courses. Many more are considering this option.

The common denominator among all these schools, if there is one, has been a commitment to offering their students engaging and demanding courses that have particular foci outside the "usual suspects" (e.g., Neuroscience, a world language not on the Advanced Placement menu, or significantly place-based) or that may be taught in ways that reflect the core values of the individual school and are aimed at fitting in with evolving understandings of the meaning of "college and career readiness." Even more compelling for many schools, perhaps, have been evolving ideas of



what we have for too long been calling “21st-century learning.” These schools have also generally rejected the idea that deep understanding can be measured by a single test or that teaching mainly or only to ensure success on such a test is in conformity with their ideals of true academic excellence—and even authentic academic and intellectual rigor.

In general, the schools that have moved “beyond AP” have chosen to understand and represent their value proposition more broadly than as a set of test scores or a course list. Along with undeniable academic “success” (as indicated, for example, by another crude and retrograde standard, selective college admissions), many of these schools provide rich extracurricular programs and vigorous, expansive programs of community and civic engagement. Many emphasize character and service as well as academic innovation, and their missions and cultures evidence a commitment to exploring all the possibilities to be found in the most current curricular and pedagogical thinking.

I would refer you again to Jonathan Martin’s “Sizing Up the Competition.” Martin makes the case that the traditional, comprehensive independent school model can offer a counterbalance to the AP-score specialists that top some rankings but which, as rigorously selective and single-focus schools, represent no more accurate a picture of the American democratic prospect than the most pernicious of independent school stereotypes. Most independent schools purport and truly intend to educate human beings, in every dimension, and there is every reason to believe that a great many of these schools have the resources and creativity to advance their programs well beyond the confines of Advanced Placement curricula, the College Board audit, and one three-hour test.

The Advanced Placement program has its place and most assuredly its value, but that value is but a portion—and for many independent schools, a small portion indeed—of the academic and programmatic riches that an enthusiastic and talented faculty in a well-resourced, creative school can mine from its mission, its values, and the inspiring interests and ambitions of its students.

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