May 2, 2008

Advancing Beyond AP Courses
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Without the required curricula and tests, students and teachers could rediscover their passion and creativity

A quiet revolution is picking up steam in the nation's private secondary schools, with broad implications for college admissions and for teaching and learning on both sides of the transition from high school to college. As I write, about 50 of the nation's leading college-preparatory schools have opted out of the College Board's Advanced Placement program, preferring to offer curricula designed by their own teachers.

The growth of the AP program in public schools has been well documented, but the exodus among leading prep schools has also accelerated in recent years. Doubts about AP are not confined to the private sector, but private schools face fewer political barriers to dropping AP than do their public counterparts. The College Board recently began auditing AP courses as part of an attempt to require schools to gain board approval of their course syllabi. That step has given private schools additional impetus to break from AP.

In the years since the AP program's inception more than 50 years ago, a vast body of research has transformed the consensus view of best practices in pedagogy, but AP's dominance of secondary education has blocked meaningful reform. A core fallacy of AP lies in its coverage of large bodies of facts and concepts that students must retain long enough to take a three-hour exam. Modern neuroscience has shown that such fast-paced, serial coverage of topics is unlikely to produce durable understanding. The deepest knowledge results when students have significant control of the learning process, and when fewer topics are studied in greater detail.

The best pedagogy at the college level is rooted in that and related insights, but AP has been an obstacle to reform at the college level. In its 2002 report, "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College," the Association of American
Colleges and Universities gave a concise summary of the problem:

"Many colleges and universities have begun to encourage more in-depth, investigative, or research-based learning even in the first year, but high-school and many AP courses continue to feature broad surveys and superficial 'coverage.' The senior year of high school, which ideally should emphasize the intellectual skills expected in college, is wasted for many students."

The movement away from AP is an attempt to reinvigorate secondary education with just the sort of practices advocated by the AACU, and also by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (see its Integrative Learning Project, for instance) and virtually all other organizations that care about classroom learning. But the AACU is wrong when it attributes the current state of secondary education to the fact that, in its words, "few colleges regularly share with secondary schools what incoming first-year students should know and be able to do."

Alas, colleges are abundantly clear about what high-school students should do: Take AP courses. In almost every admissions office and academic department, AP scores are the default standard for admission and placement. Clearly, the time is ripe for a thorough reconsideration of best practices on both sides of the college transition.

The scenario by which AP became the nation's de facto secondary-school curriculum is a tale of unintended consequences. In the early 1950s, representatives from a handful of the nation's most prominent independent schools began working with counterparts in the Ivy League and at Kenyon College to create a way for their students to get appropriate placement in the first year of college. Little did they dream that five decades later, the AP program would reach into nearly 60 percent of the nation's high schools. In its "Brief History of the Advanced Placement Program," the College Board singles out three independent schools as especially significant in the genesis of AP. Two of those, the Lawrenceville School and Phillips Exeter Academy, have since dropped AP courses.

Few seasoned educators believe that teaching to a standardized test is the best way to promote meaningful learning, whether at the secondary or college level. In a widely read opinion piece in The Washington Post in 2006, Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University, discussed the possibility that the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, known as the Spellings Commission and which was then deliberating, might recommend a
standardized test to measure the learning of college students. Bok wrote that "standardized tests are a poor way to improve the situation. It is extremely difficult to capture what students should be learning in a single set of exams, especially when colleges and their student bodies are so diverse."

By substituting "high schools" for "colleges," one can get a rough idea of the objections to the AP program among secondary schools, except that any tests contemplated for higher education would be much less prescriptive than AP tests.

Imagine how the professoriate would react to discipline-specific tests with multiple-choice questions determining as much as 60 percent of student scores. The secondary-school world has been much more compliant in the face of such testing than higher education would ever be, not because the tests are more appropriate for high school, but because of pressures exerted by the college-admissions process.

In schools where AP is most firmly entrenched, college admissions is the bottom line in much of the high-school experience. Some observers have focused on the role of college rankings in creating today's dysfunctional admissions system, and rightly so. But a more-basic issue is the transformation of high school from a place to educate teenagers into little more than a competitive arena for amassing credentials for college admissions.

High-school students are ranked cumulatively based on their academic work — even schools that technically do not rank figure the GPA numerically. Students are also ranked by SAT or ACT scores, or both. At schools that offer AP courses, the most ambitious students take virtually the same list of classes, and the competition is head-to-head.

Since each AP course covers a huge body of knowledge, teachers have little time to linger on topics that may be of particular interest, and the primary task for students is to retain as much information as possible. In those classes, students are ranked against their classmates with letter grades, and ranked again on a 1-to-5 scale when they take the AP exam.

Students are judged yet again on their ability to shoulder as many AP courses as possible: Counselors often rate each student's curriculum as "most rigorous," "very rigorous," or, the kiss of death, merely "above average." Never again for the rest of their lives will students face the level of scrutiny that they do in high school, from teachers in various AP classes — some of which play to their
strengths and in some of which they struggle.

Many teachers and school administrators get queasy stomachs when they compare today's climate with their schools' mission statements, which feature paens to such things as "joy in learning" and "learning for its own sake." Colleges, in turn, have become accustomed to grade-conscious students who are more interested in pleasing the professor than in taking intellectual risks. How could high-achieving students be otherwise?

The AP curriculum is not the cause of all that ails the transition from high school to college. It has played a vital role in raising the sights of many schools, particularly those that serve less-affluent populations, and it will no doubt continue as a significant force in secondary education for years to come. But a growing number of us on the secondary side feel the need for a new direction.

We are not against testing, and we want more rigor, not less. We understand that in moving away from AP courses, we are taking away one of the benchmarks that colleges use to evaluate students. We are grateful that, almost without fail, admissions offices have been fair-minded in considering our students, and we recognize the need to describe our curricula more fully than before.

High schools that have dropped AP courses vary in their approaches, but virtually all would agree that using a homegrown curriculum unleashes the passion and creativity of everyone in the school community. Teachers are free to offer in-depth, thematic courses on subjects they love, and students can choose advanced courses based on their interests, rather than on what will "look good" because of an AP label. Science courses can consist of more lab time and less memorization, and history courses can devote more attention to that endangered species of today's curriculum, the research paper.

Without ap, competition and stress go down, while student engagement goes up. Instead of working backward from a test to find our curriculum, we can begin with teaching and learning and then design assessments that support our pedagogy.

At Sandia Preparatory School, where we have always avoided AP, our most advanced history course is "Modern U.S. History Through Film." It does not culminate in a standardized test, but it does require 16 analytical papers of approximately five pages each.

Other alternatives to AP:

- At Beaver Country Day School, in Boston, a course on "Shakespeare's Comedies" asks students
to read and write sonnets, study plays, and participate in acting workshops. The purpose, according to the teacher, is "to experience the plays on our feet, directing and acting out individual scenes."

teams to examine an urban-policy issue. Students conduct interviews with affected populations and present their findings to a panel of city officials.

• At Germantown Friends School, in Philadelphia, a yearlong research project on the genome lets students examine evolutionary relationships between different organisms by comparing gene and/or protein sequences.

Innovative efforts such as those, and similar ones in college, promise to improve teaching and learning at all levels. But more dialogue is needed across the school-college divide. Existing transition programs focus on such things as credit requirements and counseling services, but they do not include examination of what happens in the classroom. There is plenty of talk about what students need to know, but almost nothing about how teachers and professors can maximize student learning. A useful beginning would be to assess whether courses at all levels reflect best practices as identified by the AACU, the Carnegie Foundation, and other leading authorities.

One of the Spellings Commission members, Robert Zemsky, chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in The Chronicle about his surprise at the commission's lack of attention to teaching and learning. "We talked a lot — at times seemingly endlessly — about testing what students knew and didn't know," he wrote. "But we barely discussed at all how students learn and whether different learning approaches would yield better results."

That is just the sort of conversation that many of us on the high-school side of the transition are aching to have with our colleagues in higher education. If we continue to rely instead on the Advanced Placement program to define the school-college transition, we will be forever discussing whether outmoded AP survey courses in high school are the equal of outmoded survey courses at college. Meanwhile innovative work on one side will be short-circuited by lack of reform on the other.

American high schools are at a unique moment. The possibility for a richer, more-engaging curriculum is at hand. Although the political pressures to keep AP are formidable, they are not overwhelming. Thanks to the courageous example of Scarsdale High School — the first public school in recent years to drop AP — every sector of the school world is in play. We can and must find more-effective ways to educate our young people. The students of tomorrow will be the beneficiaries.

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