

---

Published: May 1, 2006

## Advanced Hype

Studies Say AP enrollment doesn't necessarily ensure college success.

By Debra Viadero

Advanced Placement is riding a wave of popularity: Nationwide, roughly 1.5 million students take one or more AP courses from a range of 20 different subjects. And those numbers are only likely to grow, particularly in math and science. Amid fears that America is falling behind the rest of the world in those subjects, President Bush has called for tripling the number of students who take AP math and science exams, and for adding 70,000 more teachers for those subjects.

**'I don't think AP courses are a panacea for improving science in U.S. schools.'**

Philip Sadler  
Harvard University researcher

The proposal stems, in part, from studies showing that the United States' AP calculus students rank first in the world among advanced students from other developed nations on international mathematics tests. But a growing body of research is casting doubt on whether AP is the solution to the nation's perceived academic gap.

"I don't think AP courses are a panacea for improving science in U.S. schools," says Philip Sadler, a Harvard University researcher. He and a colleague recently announced findings from a study showing that AP courses don't provide much of a boost for students when they get to college. "They may be part of the solution," he adds, "but they don't deliver on some of the rhetoric that has been presented in the press and other places."

Sadler and his co-researcher examined the grades of 18,000 students enrolled in introductory physics, biology, and chemistry classes at 63 colleges and universities across the United States. While students who had taken AP courses in those same subjects received slightly better college science grades than peers who had not, the differences were minimal. And even those small gains were lopped in half when Sadler accounted for differences among students in prior achievement, other high school coursework, and parents' income and educational levels.

Their findings aren't unique. Another study shows that most students who took AP courses in high school are no more likely to have high grade-point averages or to stay in college for a second year than are students who attended regular college-preparatory classes. For that report, Texas Christian University associate professor Kristin Klopfenstein worked with another academic to gather data on 28,000 students enrolled in Texas public universities in 1999.

Klopfenstein believes more teens should tackle AP work, but not for the reasons President Bush cites. "I think that AP courses should be available to kids ... because it saves kids money in college," she opines, alluding to the college credit given to those who score well on AP exams. "The question is whether scarce federal educational dollars would be better spent."

But some experts contend that Klopfenstein might have come to a different conclusion had she taken students' AP exam grades into account. "It's important to look at whether students are actually learning the AP curricula," says Chrys Dougherty, the research director for the National Center for Educational Accountability, a nonprofit research group at the University of Texas, Austin. His study, which tracked 67,000 Texas high school students graduating in 1998, suggests

that passing AP exams is a more important factor than AP enrollment in determining whether students graduate from college on time.

A study by University of California, Berkeley, researchers Saul Geiser and Veronica Santelices looking at students in that school concluded likewise. Although AP coursework did not seem to have much impact on college grades or graduation rates, they found AP exam scores “remarkably strong” predictors of college success.

Trevor Packer, the executive director of the College Board’s AP program, says all the research suggests that high schools may be giving an AP label to classes that don’t necessarily provide college-level curricula. To discourage the practice, the board will begin auditing the courses in August.

Vol. 17, Issue 06, Page 12

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

---

**“Scholars Warn of Overstating Gains From AP Classes Alone,”** February 15, 2006.

**“Higher Proportion of Seniors Mastering AP,”** February 15, 2006.

**“To Maintain Rigor, College Board to Audit All AP Courses,”** July 27, 2005.

**“Study: AP Classes Alone Don’t Aid College Work,”** January 5, 2005.


**“Opting Out,”** May 1, 2005.


**“Mass Appeal,”** March 1, 2005.

#### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

---

A February 2006 **press release** announcing the survey of 18,000 AP students nationwide is available from Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences Office of Communications.

**"The Link Between Advanced Placement Experience and College Success"** is available from the **Texas Schools Project** at the University of Texas at Dallas. 

For AP statistics, visit the College Board's **AP Central**. The second annual **Advanced Placement Report to the Nation** is also available. 

Ads by Google

Advertise on this site

#### [Online Teaching Degrees](#)

Choose from an M.S. or Ph.D. in Education. Classes start monthly.

[www.capella-degrees.com](http://www.capella-degrees.com)

#### [Spanish for Kids](#)

Introduce your kids to Spanish through music, puppets and play

[www.hola-la.com](http://www.hola-la.com)

© 2006 Editorial Projects in Education