Whither Advanced Placement—Now?

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In 2000 Richard Riley, the U.S. secretary of education, and Gaston Caperton, the president of the College Board, announced their recommendation to offer ten Advanced Placement classes in every high school in the United States, in spite of the College Board's own research findings that predicted a high rate of failure for schools with a history of low PSAT scores. In fact, rather than raising achievement in inner-city schools, this surge appears to have catalyzed a series of failures. The program's implementation put AP courses in schools with unprepared students and teachers. This chapter suggests some lessons to be learned: schools and school district and should report AP scores openly; students need to be ready for AP before they enroll; and most minority and disadvantaged students are better served by other means than AP.

BAD OMENS IN THE INNER CITY AND THE AP SURGE.

"In the 1995-96 school year, 29 students attended an advanced placement American history class at Andrew Jackson High School and took a final exam to qualify for college credits. No one passed." (Pfankuch, 1997). Similar reports of failure in non-selective, inner city schools came out of Detroit (Lichten and Wainer, 2000), Washington, D.C. and New York City (Mathews, 2000). But strangely, rather than slow the proliferation of AP courses in the light of these outcomes, the AP program continued to grow and expand.
With the joint announcement of Education Secretary Richard W. Riley and College Board President Gaston Caperton, the goal for every U.S. high school was to offer at least ten advanced courses by the year 2010, a surge of new college level courses and exams into high schools (College Board, 2000, “College Board Launches Drive, 2000). This policy did not account for schools with high minority and poverty concentrations, high dropout rates and historically low (P)SAT or ACT scores, and expectation of the need for remedial courses upon arrival at college. These indices did not augur well for success of AP in these schools. But strangely, rather than slow the proliferation of AP courses in the light of these outcomes, the AP program continued to grow and expand. The students lacked the preparation for success from these resource-starved environments. With the joint announcement of Secretary Richard W. Riley and College Board President Gaston Caperton, the goal was for every U.S. high school was to offer at least ten advanced courses by the year 2010, a surge into high schools of new college-level courses and exams. (College Board, 2000; “College Board Launches Drive,” 2000). This policy did not account for schools with high poverty concentrations, high dropout rates and historically low PSAT, SAT, or ACT scores. Indeed, rather than being prepared for advanced college courses, many times graduates from struggling high schools need remedial courses on arrival at college. A simple question apparently left unasked is how high schools that have graduates in need of remedial college coursework can be expected to teach students to succeed on AP exams designed to determine if students may bypass introductory college courses for advanced college courses. The error in reasoning is palpable. These indices did not augur well for the success of the AP program in these schools.
Yet, despite these incongruities (Lichten, 2000), the College Board (2008, 2009) moved ahead with a recruitment pitch that especially targeted racial minorities. It claimed that, “AP isn’t just for top students or those headed for college. AP offers something for everyone.”

**AP IN PHILADELPHIA-A CASE STUDY.**

I now turn to the outcome in the School District of Philadelphia of Riley and Caperton’s grand announcement (See figure 12.1). A total of 179 AP classes were given in 41 schools in 2006, about 45 percent of Riley and Caperton’s goal of ten classes in each school in ten years, only slightly less than the progress expected towards their target number. Thus the Philadelphia public schools were doing their part towards reaching the enrollment number goal. No goal for quality of learning, as evidenced by examination scores, was announced.

A few schools (e.g. Central, Girls’, Masterman) did as well as the rest of the Nation in AP scores. These schools have long traditions of academic excellence, selective admission and SAT and AP test scores that are at the national average or higher. However, schools with a history of low SAT scores performed poorly on the AP exams. Most of these schools did not have a single AP exam score as high as 3, the lowest score claimed as passing by the College Board lenient standards. (See figure 12.1).

For schools without competitive admissions, the surge was nearly a total failure. Of the thirty-two high schools reporting average SAT-V scores between 313 and 408, only five reported exam passing rates of 10 percent or higher. The highest passing rate reported for any of these schools was 33 percent, which still indicates that two-thirds of the students received failing scores of 1 or 2 on their exams. This pattern of AP failure is not peculiar to Philadelphia, but is widespread throughout the Nation in “non-exam” urban schools where students do not have to undergo a competitive admission process. It is also true in nonurban high schools that have low
average SAT or PSAT scores (Lichten, 2000; Lichten and Wainer, 2000; Ewing, Camara, & Millsap, 2006; DeVise, 2007).
Figure 12.1. Philadelphia public high schools in 2006. Each point represents one high school. 41 high schools are arranged by their average 2006 SAT-V scores and by the percentage of the 2006 senior class who took at least one AP test and scored at least a 3. (Source: Phila. Inquirer, 2007). The red line is the expected percentage in each school of AP exams with a score of 3 or more, based on the average SAT-V scores (Ewing, Camara and Millsap, 2006).

**SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OUTCOMES OF THE AP SURGE**

Why is the performance on AP tests so poor in so many inner-city schools? Could it be racial (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969)? Yet Renaissance High School in Detroit, with an almost 100 per cent black student body, had AP math scores far above the national average and comparable to other top-performing schools in Michigan (Lichten and Wainer, 2000). This and other examples reported in major national newspapers refute this notion of a racial divide (e.g. deVise 2007) and show that
AP performance correlates well with PSAT scores, with little sign of specifically racial effects.

Is it that urban teachers and administrators are less competent? Yet, a comparison of urban-suburban performance shows no evidence for this hypothesis (Lichten and Wainer, 2000). On the contrary, perhaps AP teachers in nonselective urban schools were being asked to achieve unrealistic goals preparing students with very low PSAT scores to do college-level work. Figure 12.2 casts light on this matter. In figure 12.2 the estimated percentage of students earning a 3 or higher and 4 or higher is graphed across varying levels of performance on the PSAT exam for all students and for African Americans. Note that Black students who take the AP exam have PSAT-V scores rather close to the national average for all races of 100. About a quarter of this group get scores of 3 or higher, with a smaller percentage obtaining more realistic passing scores of 4 or higher. These successful students typically attend suburban or competitive admission urban high schools, where students exhibit both talent and preparation, and where teachers have more experience with high-achieving students.

By the very nature of the process, students with lower PSAT scores have only the option of attending non-exam schools. Figure 12.2 shows that students with PSAT scores below roughly 90 have small estimated passing rates with scores of 3 or higher and practically no chance of scoring a 4 or higher.

The evidence from College Board and other research (Ewing, Camara, and Millsap, 2006; Lichten and Wainer, 2000) supports the conclusion that PSAT and SAT performance strongly predict aggregated scores on the AP exams (see figures 12.1 and 12.2).
In particular, figure 12.1 (also Lichten and Wainer, 2000), shows that the exam scores unequivocally predicted the nearly total washout for AP scores among non-exam urban schools, the very targets of the surge that Riley and Caperton proposed in their joint statement (College Board, 2000). It is clear that Riley and Caperton were aware of the importance of adequate prerequisites. Yet it appears from their specific schedule (one AP course added each year) that they put the AP courses cart before the prerequisites horse.¹

Figure 12.2. Estimated percentage of students scoring 3 or higher and 4 or higher on the Advanced Placement English Literature exam.

*Probability of passing (pink squares for an AP score of 3 or higher; black diamonds for*
4 or higher) on the AP English Literature exam as determined by PSAT scores (source: Ewing et al. 2006). The “AV” arrow is for the national average PSAT score of students taking the AP English Literature exam (mean = 116, standard deviation 17.7, 2006):

“A-A” for the author’s estimated average PSAT score for African Americans who take this examination.

It seems that bold reinventions of education from the outside often have unrealistic and unattainable goals and fail to attend to the complexities of educational reform. Instead, effective school reforms are more likely to come from the inside (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

LOOKING BACKWARD TO SEE FORWARD. PROPHETIC WARNINGS AND THE SHAPE OF FUTURE AP POLICIES.

In 1937, Carl Brigham, the inventor of the SAT, foresaw the potential dangers of establishing a new testing agency. "What worried him most, because of his long experience with the incaution of testers…was that any organization that owned the rights to a particular test would inevitably become more interested in promoting it than in honestly researching its effectiveness" (Lemann, 1999).

According to the late psychologist Donald T. Campbell (1976) "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1976). Although Campbell addressed a multitude of human activities, he often found examples of his law in education.

Walberg (1998) puts matters in a historical perspective:

"The principle of 'conflict of interest' is hardly news. Aristotle warned his fellow citizens
to consider the source, and the ancient Romans asked who would benefit from the proposed conclusions and decisions. What is new is the pervasiveness of what we will call 'the Diogenes factor' in program evaluation. According to ancient Athenian lore, Diogenes searched, with a lighted lantern, through daytime Athens for honesty. Though fabrication may be rare in educational evaluation, we can easily find selective evidence and misleading comparisons, which favor funded programs. These lead to overestimates of program effectiveness.

**SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COLLEGE BOARD**

One might imagine if Carl Brigham were alive today, he might well advise the College Board to reconsider its policies in the light of its own research findings. The unfortunate history of the AP surge into inner city schools highlights some general points to keep in mind in any discussion of the future of the Advanced Placement program.

**The right to know.** Because of the widespread use of Advanced Placement in the Nation's schools and because much of the financing of the program comes out of public funds, *the American people have the right to know the truth about AP.*

To begin with the College Board's qualification scale, the policy lists an AP exam score of 3 as passing or “qualified” for college-level credit. About three quarters of all AP exams score 3 or higher; however data indicates that only about half of these truly qualify for college credit. This suggests that, to warrant granting college-level credit, scores should be a 4 or higher (Lichten 2000, 2007) (See figure 12.2). To cite a precedent, the “recentering”of the College Board’s SAT scale (Dorans, 2002) restored realism to a confused public discourse.

**Reporting AP exam scores, especially for schools in urban areas.** The College Board has refused to release test score results on a school-by-school or school district basis. Success stories of schools and students abound, but not much is being said about the failures. But it is from the
failures that we learn the most about how we may make change and improvements. Only through the efforts of newspaper reporters has the truth about AP scores in urban schools been revealed, as was the case for the data presented in figure 12.1. Reporters from the Philadelphia Inquirer, rather than the College Board, gathered this information about AP exam passing rates and reported the results to the public.

Given the commitment of public funds to subsidize the AP exams, it seems only prudent that the College Board should be obliged to give complete information about performance of school districts and schools. This can be done without violating the privacy of individual students. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act requires disclosure of test scores except where the number of persons in a disaggregated group is so small that student privacy would be violated.

*Open and candid reporting and interpreting of school district and school average scores are needed.* The current head of the AP program has begun a cautious beginning towards this goal (Packer, 2007). From the beginning, the AP has selected the most qualified students to participate (Lichten and Wainer, 2000). As the number of students taking AP courses expanded, it was predictable that AP exam performance would sink (Lichten, 2000). Indeed, the percentage of passing examinations has been steadily falling since 1986 (Lichten, 2000, 2007). (This is the case regardless of whether a 3 or 4 is taken to be passing.)

The most positive outcome of the surge may be to focus the attention of educators and policy makers on the importance of prerequisites for success. The College Board has long paid lip service to adequate qualification and preparation for AP courses, but the policy has seldom been translated into action. An expansive effort to audit high school curricula for courses to be listed as Advanced Placement ended in 2008 with more a thud than a bang. The effort, funded in
part by the National Science Foundation, more or less declared the problem of weak curriculum having been solved with the curriculum audits. The argument made by the College Board was that high schools fielding weak courses intended for AP exam preparation were remediated and the weaknesses corrected. However, the Board provided little information about how lack of AP teaching experience and weak contact background were handled by the AP review effort.

Finally, it must be realized that tests and grades, do not always serve well poor and minority students. The long history of the Black-White test score gap (Jencks and Phillips, 1998) indicates that AP and other programs based on standardized testing are less likely to reach the disadvantaged than are moves, such as affirmative action and achievement of diversity, that directly address educational inequalities.

The AP program of the College Board is now half a century old and has grown to be highly successful, with more than two million AP exams taken each year, an annual budget running into hundreds of millions of dollars, and plaudits bestowed by parents and politicians from the White House on down. Yet there has been a lack of critical evaluation in the light of the massive scale of this program. Recently the National Research Council (2002) has also pointed out weaknesses in the science curriculum of AP courses taught in high schools. The report noted the lack of standards and shockingly lower exam-passing rates. In several papers (Lichten, 2000, 2007; Lichten and Wainer, 2000) we have pointed out the deterioration of the quality of AP students’ examination papers as the program expanded its base by accepting less qualified applicants.

The program's recent attempt to expand into nonselective inner-city schools can best be characterized as a disaster, which realizes the prescient predictions of Karl Brigham half a century ago. It should signal the College Board for the need to reform the AP program.

**POSTSCRIPT: AP, INTELLIGENCE, AND MEASURABILITY IN EDUCATION**
This book has performed a valuable function in taking a dispassionate look at one of America's most successful educational programs, Advanced Placement. But I should like to add a few words to put the discussion in a broader context.

A dominant feature of American culture is the exaggerated respect awarded to measurability. In psychology its personification has been intelligence as measured by IQ. In education it has resulted in a national preoccupation with grades and test scores.

In this P.S. I choose two examples of wartime leaders, Colin Powell and McGeorge Bundy, whose successes and failures hinged not only on their intellectual ability but also on other factors.

Consider Colin Powell, the first African American leader of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose single-minded leadership led, in just a few days, to a stunning victory in the Persian Gulf War. In all likelihood, if he had wanted it, he could have been the nation's president. Yet, as Powell put it, he graduated from college "with an average that barely crept above a C. The only way it did creep above a C was four straight years of A in ROTC, which, thank goodness, counted on your academic record . . . I have not done particularly well in college . . . I discovered that I was . . . not pretty good in physics, calculus, geology, history, languages or any of the other [courses]" (Means, 1992).

Powell biographer Means (1992) says, "Powell gets credit for understanding what one high ranking Pentagon official-someone who has worked
closely with him-calls 'the simple things' that no academic course in government can teach. He understands how executive, political and military power are wielded in Washington (p. 78). 'I've often said in the jobs I've had, spare me geniuses,' Powell’s mentor Frank Carlucci (Sect. of Defense) adds. Judgment doesn't always accompany genius" (p. 79)

Powell's greatest failure was his speech before the United Nations in 2003, in which he charged that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (Wikipedia, 2010). The discredited evidence that he presented necessarily involved scientific matters, which, by his own admission, were not among his strong Points.

McGeorge Bundy, however, had a mixture of successes and failures and was the mirror image of Colin Powell. His academic brilliance was blinding. He was a star at Groton, the first Yale student to get perfect scores in all three College Board entrance examinations, dean of Harvard University at a young age, went on to serve as national security adviser to two presidents, and later become head of the Ford Foundation. "You can't beat brains," said President Kennedy of Bundy (Halberstam, 1992, p 44)

Bundy's greatest failure was his role in promoting the escalation of the war in Vietnam (Goldstein, 2008; Halberstam, 1992). President Johnson pronounced the epitaph to this "best and brightest" man: "a smart kid, that's all" (Halberstam, 1992, p. 625).

What do these two biographies have to do with Advanced Placement?

I conclude that academic brilliance or dullness, as shown by these two
biographies, is not the be-all or end-all of life success. Wisdom and judgment are as indispensable as the more easily measured indices of academic ability.

NOTES

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REFERENCES


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The author is indebted to Eric Schaps, President of the Developmental Studies Center, Trevor Packer, College Board Vice President and Director of the AP program, and Shirley Archie, an English teacher in Germantown High School, Philadelphia, for helpful communications.
One must read the actual statement (College Board, 2000) to appreciate the atmosphere in which the proposal for the surge was made. For example, Riley said: "About the surest and fastest way to create an angry, 19-year-old, illiterate dropout is to give that young person a watered-down curriculum. Low expectations say to youngsters that they are not smart enough to learn anything more." Was he seriously proposing AP as a solution to the dropout problem?