



How Advantageous are A.P. Courses and Exams?

The number of courses for which advanced placement exams now exist has been growing in recent years, leaving schools as well as individual students with decisions about which A.P. courses and how many to take. Colleges say that they want students who “challenge themselves” by taking the most rigorous curriculum they can handle, yet Dartmouth has just announced that it will no longer award course credit for any Advanced Placement tests because a top score of 5 on the test does not appear to correlate with success in their own equivalent courses. In adopting this new policy, Dartmouth joins the ranks of a number of other schools including Amherst, Boston College, Colby, and Williams. However, many of them will continue to grant students with high A.P. test scores advanced standing in certain departments, exempting them from some introductory level courses.

Increasingly, the A.P. program is turning into an admissions tool, which it was never designed to be. The original expectation was that students would pay the \$89 to take each test and the \$15 to send their scores to the one school they were planning to attend. The hefty cost was supposed to be far lower than what they were saving by not having to pay for the college credits. Yet high schools are now offering many of the courses to juniors and sometimes even sophomores, and increasingly students are taking them primarily to demonstrate their willingness to challenge themselves academically. When they take the courses and tests at the end of sophomore or junior year, they can put their scores on their college applications if they believe they will look good to an admissions office, but they are under no obligation to report them. Incidentally, for exceptionally strong and self-motivated students, it is possible to take the tests without taking the courses, something schools seldom tell them.

How many A.P. courses should students take? Obviously the answer to this question depends on the student and the school’s offerings – unless the high school puts a limit on the number. Some schools have begun doing that in order to protect students from trying to bite off more than they can chew. Admissions officers favor the student with A minuses and B plusses in more challenging courses over the student with straight A’s and A plusses in easier courses (on the theory that the latter was motivated more by a desire for high grades than desire to learn). On the other hand, C’s on the transcript are not going to help anyone. Nor is a nervous

breakdown or burnout before entering college. Remember, colleges want students they believe love to learn!

In general, students should take A.P. courses in the subjects that interest them the most. If they are planning to major in science or engineering, they should probably take the most advanced science courses they believe they can handle. If they are interested in studying Business and have an opportunity to take an A.P. Economics course, they should do that.

Unfortunately, the nasty truth is that the most elite colleges view certain A.P.'s as more impressive than others. They want four years of lab science rather than 3 years of lab science followed by A.P. Psychology, and they perceive A.P. Calculus as a more rigorous course than A.P. Statistics. Students applying to those colleges would be wise to know how the courses they're considering are viewed, but everyone else should opt for what makes the most sense in view of their own interests and anticipated career goals.