

What Works Clearinghouse



April 2009

WWC Quick Review of the Report “College Outcomes Comparisons by AP and Non-AP High School Experiences”[†]

What is this study about?

The study examined whether taking Advanced Placement Program® (AP) courses and exams in high school improves students’ college performance.

The study included students who graduated from Texas public high schools between 1998 and 2002 and then went on to attend a Texas public college or university.

Data on students’ college grade point average (GPA), credits earned, and graduation rates were drawn from a statewide database.

The study compared the college outcomes of students who took both an AP course and exam in a particular subject to other groups of students who did not. When making these comparisons, students were grouped according to their SAT scores and socio-economic status.

What Groups of Students Were Contrasted?

Students who took both the AP course and the corresponding AP exam in one of seven subject areas were compared to four groups:

- Students who had taken the AP course for that subject but not the AP exam
- Students who had taken the AP exam but not the course
- Students who had taken neither one, but had taken a non-AP, dual enrollment course for college credit in the same subject
- Students who had taken neither one, but had taken a non-AP, non-dual enrollment course in the same subject

WWC Rating

The research described in this report is not consistent with WWC evidence standards

Caution: The study matches student groups based on broad SAT score categories, as well as free-and-reduced-price-lunch status, but does not provide evidence that these groups were initially equivalent on academic ability. In addition, while the authors compare students whose SAT scores fell within the same broad range, they do not use statistical techniques to adjust for any remaining differences in SAT scores, or for other potential differences in academic ability across the research groups. For these reasons, differences in college outcomes between the groups cannot be attributed with confidence to the effect of AP participation.

What did the study authors report?

The study reported that students who took both the AP course and the AP exam had higher college GPAs, earned more credits, and had higher graduation rates than students who took only the AP course or a non-AP course in the same subject area. The study reported no differences between students who took both the course and the exam and students who took only the exam.

The WWC does not consider these results to be conclusive because the study does not provide evidence that the students were initially equivalent. The reported differences might reflect initial differences in the types of students who take AP courses and exams rather than the effect of AP courses and exams on college outcomes.

[†]Hargrove, L., Godin, D., & Dodd, B. (2008). *College outcomes comparisons by AP and non-AP high school experiences*. College Board Research Report No. 2008-3. New York: The College Board.