

# *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program*

*by Philip M. Sadler, Gerhard Sonnert, Robert Tai, and Kirstin Klopfenstein (2010, Harvard Education Press)*

*Reviewed by Jessica Duco, Ed.D.*

The Advanced Placement (AP) program was created to enhance the experience of gifted students as they transition from high school to college. *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program*, edited by Philip M. Sadler, Gerhard Sonnert, Robert Tai, and Kirstin Klopfenstein (2010, Harvard Education Press), brings into question the current ideals and claims of the AP Program. The book begins by placing focus on the shift the AP Program has made from a nonprofit organization aimed towards gifted students to a high revenue corporation aimed towards all students.

Sadler first points out the differences between AP courses and other high school courses. In particular, teachers of AP courses have more experience than teachers of non-AP courses. The differences between dual credit and AP courses are also examined. One issue with regard to teacher qualifications that demands more attention is the difference between AP and dual-credit courses. Dual-credit courses are offered through community colleges, and because of this, they require a teacher to have a minimum of master's degree in the content area of the course. However, the AP Program does not have the same requirement.

The difference in teacher qualifications is significant: a teacher without a master's in history, for example, could teach AP American History but not the dual credit American History course. The book examines the current debate on the effectiveness of a teacher receiving a master's degree relative to student outcomes. Considering that the majority of high school teachers with a master's receive the degree in the education field, however, it is important

to distinguish between the effectiveness of an education master's and the effectiveness of a content master's. Research measuring the effectiveness of master's degrees should focus on differentiating between the two, as at the high school level a teacher with a master's in a content area may be related to higher student achievement. If this is the case, dual-credit courses would offer an advantage to students when compared to AP courses.

Sadler and Sonnert present research which examines the relation between AP involvement and college success, specific to the science discipline. Sadler and Sonnert demonstrate that students who passed the AP exam did, in fact, earn higher grades in the introductory college course when compared to other student samples, with the exception of the subgroup containing students who took honors chemistry or physics. In that case, the student groups performed at the same level of AP students. The research also shows that students who passed the AP exam ended the introductory level course with an average grade in the B range. The authors made an important note that this research presents legitimate criticism of the AP Program with regard to the courses offering comparable college experiences.

The purpose of the AP program is for the courses to mimic the corresponding college introductory level course. In other words, AP Biology should offer the same experiences as the introductory biology course at the college level. If this held true, those students in the study who took AP Biology and then the introductory biology course in college should generally result in exposure to the same content twice. One would expect, then, that those students

would show high mastery in the college level course as it is their second experience. Students' college grades do not reflect that, however. The authors note that this could be reflective of gradual loss of content knowledge over time as they could be taking the courses a few years apart. This could be a reason why the results also showed that many students reported that even after receiving a passing score on the AP exam they saw advantage of taking the college science course 'again'. However, it should be noted that those same students also report benefits from taking the AP course in high school.

There are two important things to take from these results, for one students do report benefits of taking the AP course, which would give credit to the AP program. However, if students feel it was advantageous to take the course in college can one really conclude the AP course successfully takes the place of the introductory level course it is supposed to mimic? In other words, yes the AP program is providing benefits to students but no, the AP program is not meeting its stated mission to take place of the introductory level course. The authors make a note that the research results suggest colleges may want to reject the notion that a passing AP exam score is an indication of the college course content being mastered. Further, the colleges may benefit from considering other things when accepting AP credit including the students' grade in the AP course or a higher AP exam score.

Another important issue the text discusses is the claim from the AP Program that current policy will offer a solution to close the achievement gap. The policy is to expand the AP program to more schools and more students so that previously under representative populations will be prepared for college (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2010). The addressed misconception is that the involvement in the AP Program has a causal relationship with college success. This misconception has led to the belief that expanding the AP Program to minority students, and to schools with large populations of underperforming students, will close the achievement gap. However, previous academic experience is a large determinant of success in AP, or college-level environment readiness. Therefore, the common trend in today's high schools of what the authors refer to as "helicopter drops" (pp.182) into AP courses will not be successful in closing achievement gaps.

Another criticism of AP policy statements aimed to open the AP program to everyone is that it calls for eliminating any prerequisites. However, this is contradictory to the AP Program statements of mimicking college curriculum.

If that held true, then those students who are not performing at a high level in high school would not be ready to be placed in a rigorous course. Students would not be prepared to succeed, schools would then be placing students in an environment where they are set up to fail. Klopfenstein and Thomas (2010) note that although the policies have good intentions they may just be a waste of resources. A better approach to closing the achievement gap would be to place those resources in earlier grade levels.

This is a contradiction, expanding the AP Program to all students and the AP Program representing college level rigor, and it deserves more attention. Schools have pressure to expand the amount of AP courses and student enrollment as AP participation reflects the success of the school in current high school scoring measurements. The high school which I am a teacher has about half of the freshmen student body enrolled in the AP social studies course, AP Human Geography. These numbers are not uncommon in high school, however the question that demands to be asked is whether or not half of freshmen in public education are truly ready for college level courses?

*AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program* addresses many validated concerns of the AP Program, backing concerns with research and following with suggestions for future direction. It also brings focus to an alternative to AP that may offer more benefits to students, dual-credit programs. The dual-credit courses do have downfalls that the AP Program can override, for example, there is no common assessment to all participating students to truly compare experiences from one high school to the next. However, it does offer benefits that AP cannot. Having no standardized exam may allow teachers flexibility to place more focus on skills, opposed to the common criticism of AP forcing teachers to cram content and shut down opportunities for creativity (Sadler, 2010). Also, Klopfenstein (2010) points out that dual credit programs are more influential in shorting time to college degree and the AP program costs both the state and school districts more than dual credit programs. In high schools, such as mine, where students hold the responsibility of AP exam fees, dual credit also costs the students less. An AP exam cost around \$100 and a dual credit course under \$30. If we revisit the original AP mission, of helping gifted students transition to college, would we find content driven curriculum and standardized assessments to be the best option to offer our students?