

Improving College and Career Readiness Through An Expanded Advanced Placement (AP) Program

**Testimony of Thomas W. Rudin
Senior Vice President for Advocacy, Government Relations & Development
The College Board**

**Hearing on Effective Strategies for Accelerated Learning
Senate Health, Education Labor and Pensions Committee
April 18, 2012**

Introduction

One of the nation's most ambitious and effective accelerated learning programs is the Advanced Placement (AP) Program. As a set of 34 college-level courses taught in high school, AP has become the most influential general education program in the country and it represents the highest standard of academic excellence in our nation's schools. The AP Program is a collaborative effort between motivated students, dedicated teachers, expert college professors and committed high schools, colleges and universities. Ninety percent of the colleges and universities in the U.S., as well as colleges and universities in 30 other countries, have an AP policy granting incoming students credit, placement or both on the basis of their AP Exam grades. Many of these institutions grant up to a full year of college credit (sophomore standing) to students who earn a sufficient number of qualifying AP grades. Since its inception in 1955, the AP Program has allowed millions of students to take college-level courses and exams and to earn college credit or placement while still in high school. Next month, more than 2.1 million students will take 3.6 million AP Exams in the U.S. and across the globe; a month later, more than 11,000 high school teachers and college faculty will convene for one-week sessions at four locations to read and score these exams.

The AP Program

The principles and values of the AP Program can be stated quite simply:

- *AP supports college and career readiness.* AP represents a commitment to high standards, rigorous curricula, quality assessments and enriched academic experiences for students, teachers and schools. AP courses provide strong preparation for the challenges of college and career, including not only rigorous content but also the discipline and critical thinking skills necessary to keep up with a demanding assignment, project and assessment load.
- *AP can advance equity.* Every student should have access to AP courses and should be given the support he or she needs to succeed in these challenging courses. AP may be one of the most important tools available to educators to close the gap in graduation and

college-going rates. Research indicates that a high percentage of minority students who have demonstrated strong potential for AP courses, are not taking these courses. Therefore, educators should be redoubling their efforts to make AP participation the norm rather than the exception in our nation's high schools.

- *AP can drive school-wide academic reform.* Schools that use AP as an anchor for setting high standards and raising expectations for all students experience significant returns not just in terms of AP participation but in terms of increasing the overall quality and intensity of their academic programs.

Across the nation, every state and most school districts are exploring ways to raise standards and ensure that all students take challenging courses in science and mathematics that prepare them for success in college and career. AP is recognized as a powerful tool for increasing academic rigor, improving teacher quality, and creating a culture of excellence in high schools. Where AP Programs flourish, schools and districts use AP to support a cohesive school culture that promotes both rigor and college-going aspirations. Students who take AP courses assume the intellectual responsibility of thinking for themselves, and they learn how to engage the world critically and analytically. AP students learn to construct solid arguments, test theories and explore many sides of an issue — the kind of thinking that solves tough problems both inside and outside the classroom, in college and beyond. AP Coordinators, counselors, principals and district officials support AP teachers by providing professional development opportunities and other crucial resources. They offer a broad range of AP courses and exams so that motivated students can develop their passions and talents — whether they're interested in art, history, languages, literature, math, engineering or science.

Superintendents and principals recognize the value of AP to leverage opportunity and achievement for all students. One principal from Lincolnshire, Illinois, cited the role of AP as a driver for improving all students' readiness for college and work:

AP is helping more of our students develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed. Most of our graduates who have participated in the program report being exceptionally well prepared for the challenges of college. Feedback like this reinforces our commitment to expanding college-level opportunities for all of our students.¹

The AP Test Fee and Incentive Program

The federal AP Test Fee and Incentive Program plays a key role in expanding AP access and success for low-income students. Since the program's inception in 1999, more than 175 grants to states and districts have resulted in programs that have touched the lives of students throughout the nation and promoted a college-going culture, encouraging more of our nation's students to set high goals for themselves. When the program began, a total of 82,000 AP Exams were taken by low-income students. Today that number exceeds 530,000.

While the FY2012 appropriations for the program was \$27 million, a reduction from last year's appropriation of \$43 million, the Department of Education last week announced it would provide

¹ Dan Galloway, Principal, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Illinois, as cited in the *2001 AP Yearbook*, College Board.

additional funding so that the entire cost of AP Exams for low-income students would be covered with federal funds. This commitment by Congress and the Department of Education to fund these exams comes at a critical time and will ensure that students can benefit from taking the AP Exam and gaining college credits for successful scores.

Continued support for AP is important to students, parents, schools and districts—and to the federal government—for a number of reasons:

First, the most important predictor of college success for a student is not his or her high school GPA, his or her SAT score, or his or her extracurricular activities. Rather, it is the quality and rigor of his or her high school courses. Research shows that students who take more rigorous courses, such as Algebra II, trigonometry and AP Calculus, are the most likely to enroll in and complete college. Additionally, AP is a powerful predictor of college success. By providing students with the opportunity to enroll in challenging courses during high school, it is more likely that these students will have the confidence and motivation to set and achieve high standards for themselves and will be encouraged to enroll and succeed in college.

Second, students who take AP can earn college credit, which can save parents money spent on tuition and fees. Students who take a semester's worth of AP and earn college credit on the exams can save \$5,000-\$10,000 or more in tuition and fees in the state's public colleges and universities, and much more at private institutions. By enrolling in AP classes during high school, students are able to academically prepare themselves for college, and take advantage of financial savings for their future.

Third, schools, districts and even state departments of education value the impact of AP. Students who complete AP courses are not only prepared for the rigors of college, they are extremely well prepared for the assessments required by ESEA. The rigorous work required in AP helps students master subject matter and prepares them for any type of assessment challenge they might face, including state accountability tests and college entrance exams.

The impact of the federal AP Test Fee and Incentive Program on the lives of low-income students is significant. At a recent AP briefing on Capitol Hill, a Baltimore teacher whose district received an AP Incentive Grant in 2008 and who teaches at a school where 99 percent of the students are African American said the AP class changed the trajectory of his students' lives:

On the first day of school last year, I posted a sign on my door that read: "Welcome to AP Literature. This class will change your life." I realized by the end of the year, though, that I'd been presumptuous to assume my class could change their lives, only my students themselves can do that. What the class did was provide the space, the stimuli, the support, the opportunity for students to believe in themselves, to accelerate their skills, to strive alongside likeminded peers, to be challenged by learning at the highest levels.²

² Sean Martin, AP Literature Teacher, Friendship Academy for Science and Technology, Baltimore, MD at the AP Report to the Nation Briefing held on February 6, 2012.

The following chart illustrates the impact of AP on college-going and completion rates for low-income and minority students.

Five-year College Graduation Rate Differences Between Matched AP and Non-AP Students

Student Group	Passed AP Exam	Took, Did Not Pass AP Exam	Took AP Course, No AP Exam
African- American	28% higher	22% higher	16% higher
Hispanic	28% higher	12% higher	10% higher
Low-income	26% higher	17% higher	12% higher

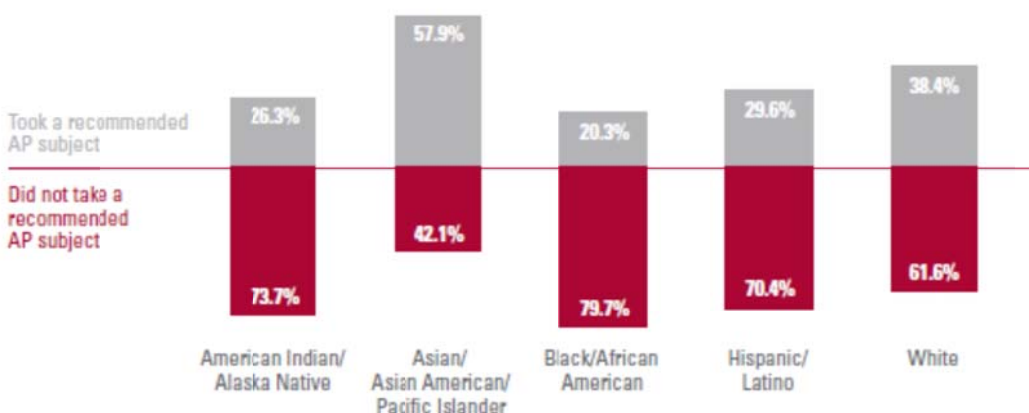
Control variables in the model include the student's 8th grade mathematics test score and economically disadvantages (free and reduced price lunch) status, and the average test scores and percent economically disadvantaged students in the student's school. College graduation probabilities were calculated at the average of each variable for the student group in question, e.g., African-American students.

Fulfilling Potential

And yet, access to AP courses is not at the level it should be. Underserved minority and low-income students remain underrepresented in AP classrooms, and the nation continues to face challenges in transforming the educational experiences of underserved students in this country. Schools that serve significant populations of minority and low-income students need support, including more professional development opportunities for teachers, and a focus on differentiated instruction and access to rigorous coursework for students. Simply expanding access to AP is not enough to promote equity; schools must expand access within a framework that supports teachers to help these students succeed.

While many schools and districts have worked to increase access to AP, hundreds of thousands of prepared students are either left out of an AP subject for which they have potential or attend a school that does not offer the subject. An analysis of nearly 771,000 graduates whose performance on the PSAT/NMSQT demonstrated that they had a strong likelihood of success in an AP course and on the AP Exam found that nearly 478,000 (62 percent) did not take a recommended AP subject. Underserved minorities appear to be disproportionately impacted (see chart below): 74 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, 80 percent of black/African American students, and 70 percent of Hispanic/Latino students did not take the recommended AP subject, thereby forgoing the chance to take a rigorous course and the opportunity to save thousands of dollars in college credits.

Figure 6: Participation in recommended AP subjects by race/ethnicity of graduates with AP potential



Online Learning

To increase access to AP courses, many states and schools are offering online opportunities to students. Online AP course development is primarily being driven by publicly funded virtual state schools providing classes free of charge to local high schools. While virtual state schools, such as New Mexico’s IDEAL-NM, show the highest AP growth rates, exam volumes are low compared to traditional course instruction method (less than one percent of overall AP Exam volume).

In 2011, a total of 18,369 AP Exams were administered for courses taken through more than 300 online providers. Of the students who took these exams, 32 percent attended high schools in rural areas. A recent analysis of AP online programs found that online courses as a share of the total AP exam volume is nearly four times as high in rural regions as in urban schools. Urban schools with large enrollment volumes report offering online courses as a way to address scheduling conflicts and extend course offering, whereas rural schools report a lack of resources to offer traditional AP courses. The AP courses with the highest number of online participants are Psychology, U.S. History and English Language & Composition and the states with the highest share of AP online provider students and exams are Florida, Virginia and North Carolina.

In addition to online AP courses offered by independent organizations, a new College Board online program is being developed and piloted to improve student outcomes and teacher quality in AP classrooms nationwide. This integrated system of online assessments, instruction and professional development will empower teachers to implement innovative, research-based instructional practices that help students of diverse backgrounds succeed in rigorous coursework. Teachers will have access to formative and interim assessments to tailor classroom instruction to unique student populations and diagnose each student’s level of understanding at key progression points.

The program identifies specific challenge areas in AP courses and ‘unpacks’ critical concepts and skills with the most common student misunderstandings flagged. Lesson plans, case studies, interactive resources, formative strategies and more help teachers and students monitor learning to close these gaps. The pilot system currently has six challenge areas, 20 interim assessments,

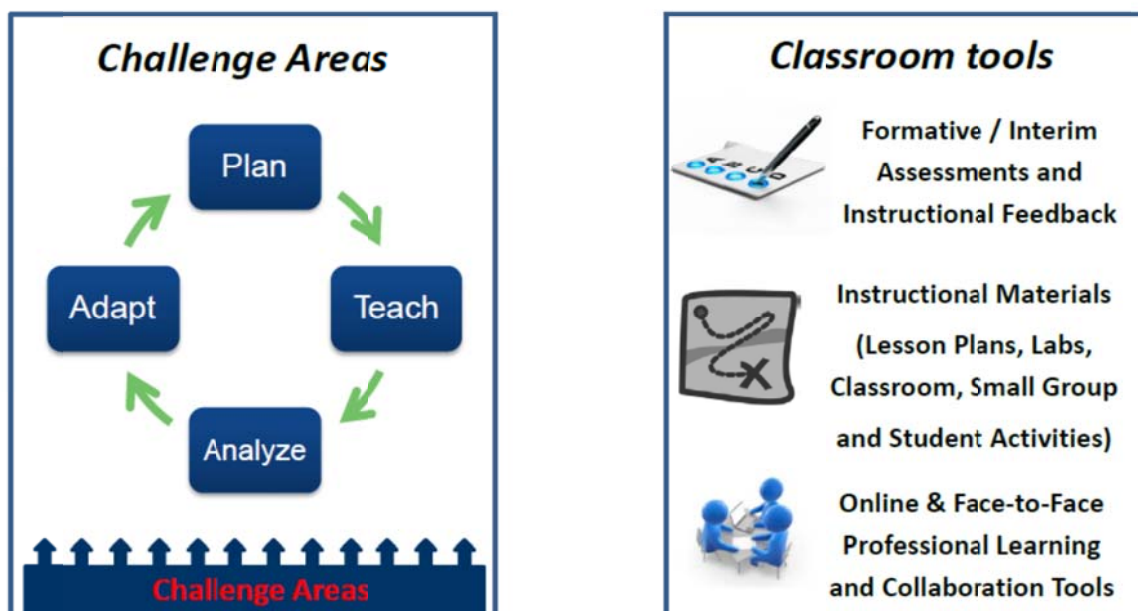
100 instructional and professional learning resources, and a collaboration space for new and experienced AP teachers. The virtual Professional Learning Community will allow AP teachers to share new instructional materials, best practices and receive lesson plans and instructional resources for the specific courses they teach.



AP Innovation Mission

Improve teaching and learning through research-based, classroom-tested tools focused on the Challenge Areas.

Help high needs students achieve success on critical concepts and skills



Examples of Successful AP Expansion Efforts

In an effort to break down barriers to AP, schools throughout the country have developed creative programs to encourage underserved students to enroll in AP courses and help them succeed. Below are examples of these initiatives.

When teachers at San Pasqual High School in Escondido, California realized that AP students did not reflect the school's diversity, they came together to recruit a broader population in the program. They knew that students taking an AP class for the first time would need to improve essential skills to succeed so they created a boot camp that focused on developing five key skills: teamwork; communication; organization; reading and problem solving (T-CORPS). Before starting their AP course, students create platoons and compete in skills events to practice each of the T-CORPS skills through experiential learning activities. As a result of the boot camp, underserved AP students at San Pasqual High School have increased their 3-plus scores on AP Exams from 42% in 2007 to 68% in 2010.

Teachers at Franklin High School in Portland, Oregon fought to keep their school open when budget cuts threatened closure. They worked to increase rigor and created the Advanced Scholar Program. Students in the program commit to taking at least four AP classes, or three AP classes and one dual-credit class, during their four years at Franklin. Each student receives a mentor, usually an AP teacher, with whom the student must meet with twice a month. The Advanced Scholars also meet monthly as a group, where they discuss personal organization, the college application process, scholarship essays and personal essays for college. From 2007 to 2010, Franklin High School's low-income AP students grew from 20 percent to 37 percent of its total AP population.

Underserved students at Pflugerville High School in Texas were not choosing AP courses and teachers wanted to understand why. A focus group of these students revealed that they often did not see teens or teachers like themselves in AP and they hadn't always received the necessary encouragement. Thus began the Ambassadors for AP Program, where students help recruit their peers to participate in AP by speaking at parent information nights and performing skits about the benefits of AP to demystify the program for students and parents. Since the program began in 2006, the increase in 3-plus scores by underserved AP students at the school has increased from 20 percent to 28 percent in 2009.

Conclusion

AP has tremendous potential to drive reform in all of our nation's schools. AP is not for the elite, it is for the prepared. Support for expanded AP and Pre-AP teacher professional development will prepare many more students for the opportunity to succeed in college and work. Activities that support student preparation for AP starting even at the middle school level will also have significant payoff. No single program can have as significant and sustained impact on accelerating student learning, and preparing more students for college and career success, than Advanced Placement.

Efforts at the school and state level have been strongly supported by the federal government's significant investment in expanding AP opportunities for low-income students. As a result, the growth in participation among these students has been remarkable and helps to prepare them for success in college while making college more affordable. The AP program is proven to work, and produces achievement gains like few other programs for students who need help the most. We believe it is critical for the federal government to continue to support AP and the students who benefit from the program.