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AP and IB courses: Are they truly rigorous?

Posted By [Justin Snider](#) On April 7, 2010 @ 11:59 am In [Higher Ed,K-12,News,What is Rigor?](#) | [5 Comments](#)

It has become almost impossible to speak of a rigorous high school curriculum without also speaking of [Advanced Placement](#) ^[1] (AP) or [International Baccalaureate](#) ^[2] (IB) courses. To many people, they are synonymous: rigor and AP; rigor and IB.

Policymakers, educators, advocates for educational equity and journalists have all helped conflate these terms by using them interchangeably. With everyone jumping on the AP and IB bandwagons, it is easy to forget that claims of curricular rigor always merit scrutiny.

Politicians are among the most vocal champions of AP and IB courses. In his [2006 State of the State address](#) ^[3], [Gov. Tim Pawlenty](#) ^[4] of Minnesota said: "Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs provide the rigor and relevance we need to prepare our students for the future." He called on districts across his state to introduce AP or IB courses for all students, and he proposed spending \$7 million on financial incentives for districts willing to do so.



Tim Pawlenty

The Advanced Placement program, which is administered by [the College Board](#) ^[5], offers 37 courses in 20 subject areas. In 2007, the College Board began requiring teachers to submit syllabi and receive individual approval before the "AP" label could be included on student transcripts. Teachers design their own courses and syllabi but these must meet various curricular and resource requirements specified by the College Board. Students can take an AP course without taking the AP exam, or can take an AP exam without having taken an official AP course. The exams are graded on a scale of 1 to 5 by more than 10,000 AP teachers and college faculty who come together each June for a weeklong scoring session.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program offers 129 courses in six core subject areas to students in over 120 countries. Almost all courses are two years in length, and teachers design their syllabi according to IB specifications. Students completing the IB Diploma Program take exams in all six subject areas, which are graded on a scale of 1 to 7 by 5,000 examiners around the world. Additional IB requirements include at least 150 hours of extracurricular involvement, a 4,000-word extended essay and a 1,600-word "theory of knowledge" essay.

At more than \$80 each, AP and IB exams are not cheap. Most states now receive federal money to subsidize the costs of such exams for low-income students. Many states have also begun to mandate that each district offer at least one AP course in English, math, science and social studies.

Enrollment in AP and IB courses has skyrocketed in recent years – 1.6 million students took AP exams in 2008, more than double the number who did a decade ago – partly because admissions officers at selective colleges, faced with unprecedented numbers of applicants, began expecting serious students to have taken the most challenging courses available to them. Another source of the growth is that advocates for educational equity demanded that low-income and minority students enjoy equal access to such advanced classes. Demand for these courses, as a civil right or as part of an equitable education, has even spawned online AP and IB classes for use in rural areas. Yet another explanation for increased enrollments is that [Jay Mathews](#) ^[6] of the [Washington Post](#) ^[7] began in 1996 to rank high schools on the number of AP and IB exams that students take. [Mathews' "Challenge Index"](#) ^[8] does not, however, take into account passage

rates. The College Board has welcomed this trend, aggressively marketing AP courses to expand its customer base.

The AP program began in 1955 as a way to serve elite students by allowing them to complete challenging coursework in their final two years of high school that would then count toward a college degree. The IB Diploma program didn't start until 1968, but it too had elitist roots. The IB curriculum, based more on the European model of education, was piloted first in international schools. Today, AP and IB courses have become the default college-prep curriculum in many high schools.

But amid this AP and IB frenzy, what evidence exists that such courses are actually rigorous? To answer this question, the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) [9] conducted a study [10] in 2007 called "Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?" The study looked specifically at AP and IB courses in English, math, history and biology. Among the criteria for judging each course was the "level of intellectual challenge" it posed for students. The study's conclusion was that AP and IB courses are, in fact, "mostly gold and mostly worthy of emulation."

But why? The study's authors suggest that two elements characterize a rigorous curriculum: high academic standards and goals, coupled with rigorous exams well-aligned with the standards. The third leg of the standards and accountability tripod is teaching that helps students meet course demands.

This hardly sounds revolutionary. And yet AP and IB programs have succeeded – where states have largely failed – in setting high standards and designing well-aligned assessments. A closer look at the standards and assessments is thus in order.

Consider A1 Higher Level English in the IB curriculum: Over the course of two years, students study 15 literary works from various genres, time periods and regions of the world. Everybody studies at least one work by Shakespeare. Students become masters at analyzing prose and poetry they've never seen before, and they learn to comment intelligently on a writer's style as well as his use of literary techniques such as irony, foreshadowing, and symbolism.

What drives the IB and AP curricula, however, is the exam. And this is why those who support these courses are sometimes seen as radicals: They do not view "teaching to the test," an abhorrent practice to many, as controversial or a source of embarrassment. If the test is good, the argument runs, then teaching to it isn't problematic.

What makes for a good test? In the case of A1 Higher Level English, the test involves a 15-minute oral exam on a passage from a literary work the student has studied; two essays completed at home (with teacher feedback on initial drafts); and two essays (each two hours long) written under exam conditions. Because students don't know the topics of the final two essays until they sit down to write, they must be intimately familiar with the works they've studied. A typical IB English exam question is: "Examine the ways in which rebels, outsiders, or characters alienated in some other way from their society have been presented in two or three of the works you have studied."



Mark-Up of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"

Superficial knowledge of [Albert Camus' *The Stranger*](#) ^[11] will not suffice here.

All four essays are graded not by the teacher but by experts elsewhere. The teacher assigns grades for the 15-minute oral exam, but the exam is recorded and experts who listen to samples can adjust a teacher's grades. For a teacher, this means there are no shortcuts to preparing students well: Each student must be able to speak and write cogently about prose and poetry he has never seen before. There also is no room for grade inflation. Unprepared students will do poorly, and these results will reflect negatively on their teacher. The stakes are high, but college credit awaits those who do well.

AP exams, by contrast, rely more on multiple-choice questions. The AP English literature exam, for instance, consists of a one-hour multiple-choice test (with 55 to 60 questions) and three 40-minute essays. The multiple-choice section counts for 45 percent of the exam grade, the essays 55 percent. Both assess a student's ability to interpret literature.

But even AP exams that require students to know a lot of facts – such as those in U.S. and European history – also foster critical thinking among students. Consider the European history AP exam. It is not uncommon for students to learn by heart hundreds of significant events and the dates they occurred during five centuries of European political, economic and social history. Such memorization serves them well on the multiple-choice questions. But to write the essays – making a case for why the [Treaty of Versailles](#) ^[12] led to [World War II](#) ^[13] or why nation-states came to replace empires in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe – students must also understand how all of the facts fit together. They have to be able to see causes, consequences and trends. A decade or two later, students likely recall few of the dates they once knew. But what remains are the critical thinking skills they developed, which allow them to see the big picture and make connections among seemingly unrelated pieces of information.

AP and IB teachers realize what many others do not: that the “content vs. critical thinking” debate is a false dichotomy. The two sides should be seen as complementary, not mutually exclusive. And the debate is largely irrelevant in most high school classes, which offer a thin intellectual gruel that neither asks students to learn much content nor to think about what they do learn.

Yet, while AP and IB courses have spread in recent years, some schools and districts have decided to drop them. Their rationale is almost always that they wish to escape what they say is the curricular straitjacket imposed by such programs. AP courses in particular are dismissed as requiring teachers to cover too much ground too quickly.

When “coverage is king,” as some educators say, that coverage is often decried as mile wide and inch deep.

John Klemme, principal of [Scarsdale High School](#) ^[14] in New York, justified his school's decision to drop AP this way in an [October 2008 Education Week letter to the editor](#) ^[15]:

[Our school] has made the decision to move beyond the AP curriculum – not because it does not serve many students well elsewhere who might otherwise not enjoy a rigorous curriculum, but because it does not mesh well with the intellectual aspirations we hold for our students. We are in the fortunate position to be able to deliver students richer courses of study in all disciplines that encourage higher-order thinking and habits of mind such as synthesis, evaluation, persistence, and tolerance for ambiguity in the face of difficult questions and problems.

Scarsdale has thus replaced AP with what it calls “Advanced Topics” courses. The move has raised eyebrows among some observers, who question the real motives of affluent schools that drop AP or IB. [Bruce Poch](#) ^[16], vice president and dean of admissions at [Pomona College](#) ^[17], has suggested that the “independent schools moving away from AP are either reaching to define a new elite standard for the parents and students they serve – or, perhaps, a more cynical assumption is that they are just working to find another way to offer something which won't be so easily measured by a common scale.”

In a [January 2010 New York Times video op-ed](#) ^[18] entitled “Advanced Pressure: The Problem

with A.P. Classes,” an AP biology teacher at [Acalanes High School](#) ^[19] in Lafayette, Calif., said “the course is a runaway train. There’s no way we can cover all of the material in one year. It’s impossible.” The teacher, Jay Chugh, also said, “I feel like I’m doing a disservice to the students because I’m sacrificing quality of content for quantity of content.”

[Deborah Stipek](#) ^[20], Dean of the School of Education at [Stanford University](#) ^[21], concurred: “Unfortunately, it’s turned into a kind of gatekeeper to many universities, so now it’s not going deeper, really challenging yourself. It’s ‘how many AP classes can I rack up so that I have more AP classes than the people I’m competing with’ ... and it creates a mentality that was expressed very well by my daughter. After her French AP test, she said, ‘I never have to speak French again.’ ”

Despite such criticism, the Advanced Placement program continues to enjoy tremendous growth and thus seems unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future.

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#1 Pingback By [Class Size DOES Matter | Larry Ferlazzo’s Websites of the Day...](#) On September 11, 2010 @ 5:56 pm

[...] find out how long he taught in a high school or where he taught, I did find that he was a course examiner for the International Baccalaureate program. I assume that means he taught IB [...]

#2 Comment By [rod ruger](#) On March 18, 2012 @ 12:45 pm

The IB program is simply another educational gimmick foisted on teachers who must divert time from core courses to touchy-feely, jargon laden IB material. If you have been a teacher or a business manager for 20 years or more, you have seen consultant-based flavors of the year come and go. Each new “solution” is advertised as the greatest idea ever and sucks money from schools and businesses that do not know any better. ISO9000 was a big scam in business management. Any business that was not way ahead of ISO9000 pursuant to simple good management principles was on its way out of business, regardless of its passing ISO inspection.

Ask classroom teachers, especially in the lower grades, their opinion of IB and what studies they have to ignore in order to push IB ideas. I know many teachers who are fed up with gimmicks forced upon them by school boards and administrators. Boards decide, assign implementation to local administrators who are politically motivated (head-noddors), who force IB on teachers who have no say in the matter. We then judge teachers by how well they perform their jobs given whacky ideas imposed upon them from non-teachers. The more consultants become involved in

the schools, the more pieces of paper teachers must fill out, taking time from preparing and teaching. Several teachers have told me that they are beyond caring any longer. Who can blame them?

I have read and read about IB programs. Reports are replete with jargon, fluff, and high sounding ideas. The above article says nothing, for example. There is no objective substance to positive statements about IB. The author's critique of IB is nothing more than a rehash of what others (who?) have said. That is what consultants do.

Take any problematic area of education, business, government, society, defense, you name it and there will be flocks of consultant vultures telling us what to do for a price (no refund). IB is just such a solution. There will be many more until we identify root causes and address problems employing the intimate knowledge of true, experienced educators.

If we want to benefit from studying our many problems, we might refer to the writings of W.E. Deming to start.

#3 Pingback By [Rigor: It's all the rage, but what does it mean? | Hechinger Report](#) On July 22, 2013 @ 2:00 pm

[...] students, are now ubiquitous and the de facto college-prep curriculum in many urban high schools. (Click here for a look at the AP program and the State Scholars Initiative.) Most states now also let high school students take community college classes for [...]

#4 Comment By [C. Ritical](#) On September 29, 2013 @ 7:42 pm

Lots of hand waving, the above critique was vague, thus worthless. No examples cited above of the supposed 'fluff'. Perhaps the individual is not an educator and does not understand the field? Been teaching IB for a long time, AP too. Prefer IB as broader and deeper. It is less US-centric, more 'global' so it is particularly good for international schools. And for teachers and students who can look beyond our US borders.

IB received some criticism from US ultra-right wingers for being too liberal, bizarrely enough. Agenda before education. Doubtless not enough Bible in there.

#5 Comment By [Elizabeth Johnson](#) On October 1, 2014 @ 4:31 pm

I am a student in the IB program, and I am also taking courses that are AP as well as IB. I can tell you that at my school at least, the work required by AP students is no where near the amount of work required by IB students. IB students are required to be in all IB classes, while AP students can choose to take AP in only one, two, or however many of their classes they would like. From my experience IB classes are much more rigorous than AP classes. IB almost puts an unhealthy amount of pressure and work on students, and almost all of the IB students I know spend more hours on school and homework than that required by a full time job.

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URLs in this post:

[1] Advanced Placement: <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf>

[2] International Baccalaureate: <http://www.ibo.org/>

[3] 2006 State of the State address: <http://www.stateline.org/live/details/speech?contentId=96420>

[4] Gov. Tim Pawlenty: <http://www.governor.state.mn.us/>

- [5] the College Board: <http://www.collegeboard.com/>
- [6] Jay Mathews: <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/>
- [7] Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>
- [8] Mathews' "Challenge Index":
<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/challengeindex/ranking/2010/>
- [9] Thomas B. Fordham Institute: <http://www.edexcellence.net/>
- [10] a study: <http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/APIB.pdf>
- [11] Albert Camus' *The Stranger*: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stranger_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stranger_(novel))
- [12] Treaty of Versailles: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_versailles
- [13] World War II: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II
- [14] Scarsdale High School: <http://scarsdale.schoolwires.net/shs/site/default.asp>
- [15] October 2008 *Education Week* letter to the editor:
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/01/06letter-2.h28.html>
- [16] Bruce Poch: <http://www.pomona.edu/about/leadership/leadership.aspx>
- [17] Pomona College: <http://www.pomona.edu/>
- [18] January 2010 *New York Times* video op-ed:
<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/01/24/opinion/1247466680941/advanced-pressure.html>
- [19] Acalanes High School: <http://acalanes.acalanes.k12.ca.us/>
- [20] Deborah Stipek: <http://ed.stanford.edu/suse/faculty/displayRecord.php?suid=stipek>
- [21] Stanford University: <http://ed.stanford.edu/suse/index.html>
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