**AP Classes Are a Scam**

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The College Board earns over half of all its revenues from the courses -- and, in an uncertain environment, students keep being suckered.

Fraudulent schemes come in all shapes and sizes. To work, they typically wear a patina of respectability. That's the case with Advanced Placement courses, one of the great frauds currently perpetrated on American high-school students.

That's a pretty strong claim, right? You bet. But why not be straightforward when discussing a scam the scale and audacity of which would raise Bernie Madoff's eyebrows?

The miscellany of AP courses offered in U.S. high schools under the imprimatur of the College Board probably started with good intentions. The idea, going back to the 1950s, was to offer college-level courses and exams to high-school students. The courses allegedly provide students the kind of rigorous academic experience they will encounter in college as well as an opportunity to earn college credit for the work.

Sounds pretty good. And every year, millions of high-school students enroll in the courses that are offered in 39 different subjects. They do so at an annual growth rate almost ten times the yearly percentage increase in the number of high school graduates. If there weren't something good about AP, would participation in the AP offerings be so high?

Interestingly, the evidence providing the clearest positive argument for AP participation is that high performance in AP courses correlates with better college grades and higher graduation rates, especially in science courses. But that's faint praise. It's the same as saying that students who do best in high school will do better in college and are more likely to graduate.

My beef with AP courses isn't novel. The program has a bountiful supply of critics, many of them in the popular press (see here and here), and many increasingly coming from academia as well (see here). The criticisms comport, in every particular, with my own experience of having taught an AP American Government and Politics course for ten years.

AP courses are not, in fact, remotely equivalent to the college-level courses they are said to approximate. Before teaching in a high school, I taught for almost 25 years at the college level, and almost every one of those years my responsibilities included some equivalent of an introductory American government course. The high-school AP course didn't begin to hold a candle to any of my college courses. My colleagues said the same was true in their subjects.

The traditional monetary argument for AP courses -- that they can enable an ambitious and hardworking student to avoid a semester or even a year of college tuition through the early accumulation of credits -- often no longer holds. Increasingly, students don't receive college credit for high scores on AP courses; they simply are allowed to opt out of the introductory sequence in a major. And more and more students say that's a bad idea, and that they're better off taking their department's courses.

The scourge of AP courses has spread into more and more high schools across the country, and the number of students taking these courses is growing by leaps and bounds. Studies show that increasing numbers of the students who take them are marginal at best, resulting in growing failure rates on the exams. The school where I taught essentially had an open-admissions policy for almost all its AP courses. I would say that two thirds of the students taking my class each year did not belong there. And they dragged down the course for the students who did.

Despite the rapidly growing enrollments in AP courses, large percentages of minority students are essentially left out of the AP game. And so, in this as in so many other ways, they are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to college admissions.

The AP program imposes "substantial opportunity costs" on non-AP students in the form of what a school gives up in order to offer AP courses, which often enjoy smaller class sizes and some of the better teachers. Schools have to increase the sizes of their non-AP classes, shift strong teachers away from non-AP classes, and do away with non-AP course offerings, such as "honors" courses. These opportunity costs are real in every school, but they're of special concern in low-income school districts.

To me, the most serious count against Advanced Placement courses is that the AP curriculum leads to rigid stultification -- a kind of mindless genuflection to a prescribed plan of study that squelches creativity and free inquiry. The courses cover too much material and do so too quickly and superficially. In short, AP courses are a forced march through a preordained subject, leaving no time for a high-school teacher to take her or his students down some path of mutual interest. The AP classroom is where intellectual curiosity goes to die.

In short, somewhere along the way over the past half-century, the AP idea got corrupted.

Many critics lay the blame on the College Board itself, a huge "non-profit" organization that operates like a big business. The College Board earns over half of all its revenues from its Advanced Placement program -- more than all its other revenue streams (SATs, SAT subject tests, PSATs) combined. The College Board's profits for 2009, the most recent year for which records were available, were 8.6 percent of revenue, which would be respectable even for a for-profit corporation. "When a non-profit company is earning those profits, something is wrong," says Americans for Educational Testing Reform. (The AETR's "report card" on the College Board awards a grade of D and cites numerous "areas of misconduct" by the College Board.)

It's clear the College Board has the mentality of a voracious corporation, charging $89 a shot for an exam to millions of students who have no business taking it.

The college admissions process today is a total crapshoot. At least for the most competitive colleges, nobody in the applicant pool has any certainty anymore as to what will secure admission. In the face of that uncertainty, one rational form of behavior is to take the shotgun approach, blasting away at the admissions committee with every weapon in the student's armory: multiple AP courses, ridiculous amounts of extracurricular activity, and do-gooder volunteer work rivaling Mother Teresa's.

Lots of guidance counselors will advise families and students that a rational alternative is to opt out of that race. Concentrate on one or two things. Excel at them. I agree.

But it shouldn't be the customer's responsibility to stop a scam. The customer buys into it because the con artist is so skillful and the world is so uncertain. The only way to stop the College Boards of the world is to expose them. Tell people to be wary.

So, students and parents: beware.

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