



New ACCORD Study Tracks Changes in Advanced Placement Test Taking in California High Schools: 1998-2003

Since the mid-twentieth century, The College Board's Advanced Placement Program (AP) has secured a reputation for being, in its own words, "the premier program advancing educational excellence in secondary schools across the United States," and "the gold standard in American education." Many analysts question whether this glowing characterization is justified, but most would agree that the perception of its truth is ubiquitous. Clearly, parents, policy makers, schools and colleges, and the public at large rely on AP classes and test scores to determine what is high quality coursework, who is most deserving to go to college, which secondary schools are doing the "best job" of educating youth, and more.

Thus, in many different ways, enrollment in AP courses gives students access to the knowledge and status that certify them as highly qualified for college enrollment. And it follows that students who do not successfully participate in AP courses will not have access to the knowledge and certification that open doors to higher education. It was the unequal distribution of these opportunities (ex., knowledge, extra "points" to raise one's grade point average, meeting college admissions requirements) that prompted the American Civil Liberties Union to file a suit in 1999 on behalf of students at Inglewood High School alleging that their three AP course offerings (in contrast to other schools that offered 15, 20, or more) were inadequate.

Responding to that lawsuit, the California Department of Education initiated the AP Challenge Grant program, designed to increase the availability of and participation in AP courses for ethnic minority students in California high schools. This new UC ACCORD study, conducted by Professor Richard Brown, reports on how schools have responded and offers several important findings.

MORE STUDENTS TAKE AP TESTS, BUT THE "PARTICIPATION GAP" HAS GOTTEN WIDER – It is clear that all groups increased the number of tests taken between 1998 and 2003. However, the data also shows that the proportion of African-American and Hispanic students who took the tests increased at a substantially lower rate than the proportion of White and Asian-American students. Thus, as more students from all groups were tested, the gap in rates of participation among different groups got wider.

SCHOOLS CAN DRAMATICALLY AND QUICKLY INCREASE THEIR RATES OF AP TEST TAKING – Some schools showed exemplary growth in AP activity. For example, students in one Los Angeles school took only 12 tests in two AP subjects in 1998. Students at that same school took 273

tests in ten AP subjects just six years later. A "high desert" Southern California school accounted for just 53 tests in two subject areas in 1998, but produced 378 tests from 16 subject areas in 2003. And a San Diego County school generated 31 tests in two subject areas in 1998 as compared to 521 tests in twenty-one subject areas in 2003. Clearly, schools can make rapid and substantial progress in the number of tests taken and the variety of opportunities provided to students.

PREPARATION HAS NOT KEPT PACE WITH PARTICIPATION – In 1998, the average score on AP tests resulted in a passing grade. In 2003, the average score resulted in a non-passing grade. However, not all AP subjects declined; for example, Calculus AB, Spanish, and Statistics showed improvements along with a substantial growth in test taking activity.

SCHOOLS ARE NOT PREPARING ALL GROUPS EQUALLY WELL TO TAKE THE TESTS – While overall scores declined about a 5%, Hispanics' average score decline was around 12.4%, African-American scores dropped about 6%, and White and Asian American students produced a 2-3% score decline.

MUCH WORK REMAINS IN ORDER TO STEM AND REVERSE THE TREND TOWARD UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITY -- The data in this study suggest three broad avenues for continued work:

- ◆ Support efforts by community members, educators, and policy makers to provide all students with rigorous, opportunity-rich courses that are taught by highly qualified, fully credentialed teachers. Closely monitor progress toward and distribution of these opportunities.
- ◆ Support all students with opportunities and resources to gain the skills and confidence for success with demanding coursework. To close gaps in the rates of participation and success in AP courses, new support resources can go to students who face the greatest obstacles in accessing opportunities.
- ◆ As recommended by the College Board, recognize multiple indicators of educational merit and competence to mitigate the disproportionate influence that AP has in determining access to high school and college opportunities.

For a copy of the full study visit UC ACCORD's website:
www.ucaccord.org