

Advanced Placement Examinations

... how they influence curricular planning.

WHAT is an "advanced placement examination"? Broadly speaking, this is any examination used as a basis for placing a new college student at some point in the curriculum more advanced than the one at which a secondary school graduate usually enters. Surely a definition so extensive would defy treatment in a paper such as this. Since almost every college administers examinations to allow placement of students beyond the normal starting point, literally hundreds of different schemes, with varying designs and impact, would have to be considered.

One overall program, however, is fairly common in this area. This program takes the form of the Advanced Placement Examinations administered by the College Entrance Examination Board in 11 fields (American History, Biology, Chemistry, English, European History, French, German, Latin, Mathematics, Physics, and Spanish).

The Advanced Placement Program, and the examinations which, for the student, are the culmination of the program, have been administered by the College

Board for seven years. The Program grew out of the School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing, and the School and College Study of General Education, both of which were financed by the Fund for the Advancement of Education. From a small beginning in 1955, the Program has expanded to the point at which 16,300 students from 1,350 schools took 21,500 examinations in the spring of 1962.

Although the Advanced Placement Program has expanded rapidly, it still affects a small minority of the secondary schools. Since most students taking the examinations have been rigorously selected within these schools, an even smaller proportion of the students graduating from school is affected.

Yet the Advanced Placement Examinations, and the Program itself, probably affect the development of secondary school curriculum out of proportion to the number of schools and students directly concerned. The most readily recognizable effect on curricular planning stems from the examinations, and the course descriptions on which the examinations are based. Indirect influence is possibly even more far-reaching.

In each of the 11 subject-matter areas in which Advanced Placement Examina-

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tions are presently offered, a committee composed of three college professors and two school teachers (one each from public and independent schools) constructs a rigorous test each year. All of the examinations require three hours. All have at least two hours of essay questions; some are exclusively free-response, while others have multiple-choice sections. All of them, however, are designed to assess competence in a college-level course in the field.

It may be argued that there are no prescribed outlines for courses offered in the freshman year in college; each college decides for itself what will be offered. In most cases, other colleges honor credit given, without insisting on examinations or other validation. The time may come when this is true of college-level courses offered in secondary school. But, at present, there are many reasons why examinations are both necessary and desirable. Secondary school teachers, in most instances, seek the guidance thus offered. More practically, colleges insist on control and validation, and recognition by colleges is an essential ingredient of the Advanced Placement Program.

The course descriptions¹ written by the committees of examiners are, therefore, a controlling factor in planning the curriculum of any advanced placement course which will lead to these specific examinations. There is a clear parallel between the Advanced Placement Examinations and the old, restrictive College Board subject-matter examinations, which long ago departed unlamented. If, as some predict, advanced courses become an established part of all secondary education in this country, control may shift back to the schools. In that case,

¹ *Advanced Placement Program: Course Descriptions*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1962. 152 p.

we might expect the present restrictive Advanced Placement Examinations to be replaced by permissive tests, similar to the present College Board Achievement Tests. This will mean, in effect, that the college freshman year has shifted back into the schools. The curricular implications of such a shift are, of course, beyond the scope of this paper.

For the present, Advanced Placement Examinations must continue to be based on clear course descriptions. Yet the committees recognize the desirability of leaving as much latitude as possible, and try to make their descriptions, and their examinations, as unrestrictive as is consistent with their tasks of measurement.

For instance, in outlining the advanced course in English, the examiners say simply that the course should not attempt a survey of English or American Literature, but should rather emphasize a close study of relatively few works. The examiners suggest that most of the literature, except for short stories, should have been written before World War I, and that it should avoid the extremes of popular melodrama and sentimentality on the one hand, and complex and subtle works on the other. The examiners then present a reading list, with the recommendation that at least half the reading in the course be devoted to works selected from the list, and with the admonition: "No question on the examination, however, will name a specific work and require the candidate to discuss it." Thus the English teacher is left a great deal of latitude in choosing what to teach and how to teach it. The principal restriction is that the course should be of college caliber.

In such fields as the sciences and mathematics, the contents of a college-level course are more readily and narrowly defined. Although the mathematics

examiners enlarge on the theme in their description of the course, their opening statement is basic: "The advanced placement course in mathematics is a full year course in calculus and related analytic geometry." This statement, in itself, fairly well restricts what can be taught if a student is to pass the examination satisfactorily.

Other Direct Curricular Influences

If a student is to take a college-level course during his senior year in high school, it is clear that he must be prepared for that course by the time he reaches his senior year. In some fields this does not require any disruption of the normal sequence of courses in the first three years of high school. In others, however, the influence reaches down at least to the eighth grade level. Again, in mathematics, a course in calculus assumes that a student has had the full four-year sequence of secondary school mathematics.

The committee of examiners, therefore, recommends specifically that a student, before beginning the advanced placement course, should have completed the secondary school mathematics program by one of the following means: (a) by beginning the study of secondary school mathematics in the eighth grade; (b) by taking up the subject matter of secondary school mathematics at a faster rate; (c) by devoting more time to mathematics in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades; (d) through a reorganization of the content of the mathematics of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades; or (e) by a combination of one or more of these methods.

Thus, an advanced placement mathematics course during the senior year will affect directly not only the preparation

in mathematics during the three or four previous years, but will also affect indirectly the rest of the student's curriculum. Yet, even here, the examiners do not prescribe the order in which the preparatory courses are to be taken, or their exact nature. The committee simply assumes that the student will be prepared for the course in calculus to be taken during his senior year.

Other Advanced Placement Examinations have similar direct effects. For instance, the modern language examinations all include listening comprehension sections; schools preparing students for these examinations must, therefore, provide at least some oral-aural work in the language.

Another direct effect of the Advanced Placement Examinations is the limit in subject-matter areas established by the examinations offered. This effect is tied more to the bugaboo of recognition, and perhaps of college credit, than to the examinations themselves. But the effect is present, and the examinations, which lead to recognition and credit, are the cause. Schools which wish to offer advanced courses for superior students in Asian history, music, or philosophy may hesitate to do so because the Advanced Placement Program offers no examinations in these fields. Students taking such courses might feel penalized because they would not see ahead the rewards granted to those who successfully complete the Advanced Placement Examinations. The ultimate culprit here is our system of academic bookkeeping, though many colleges provide sufficient flexibility to take such courses into account, and reward these students also. But anyone responsible for planning curricula might naturally hesitate to design a course not presently recognized formally by the Advanced Placement Program.

The dedicated school and college teachers who plan, and constantly revise, the various aspects of the Advanced Placement Program are conscious of these direct influences on curricular planning. They recognize the necessity for sufficiently defining course content. The general design of the Program, and the specific course descriptions, are therefore made as permissive as is possible.

Furthermore, the Advanced Placement Committee is actively studying proposals for the inclusion of more subjects within the Program. The Committee also actively urges schools to experiment with new courses and with new methods of teaching.

Indirect Influences on Curricular Planning

There are many other ways in which the Advanced Placement Program, and the examinations, affect curriculum in both the secondary schools and in the colleges. Some of these effects are readily recognizable; others are more subtle.

College courses are, in general, significantly more subject-matter centered than are secondary school courses. Of necessity, then, the advanced placement courses are more subject-matter centered. Inevitably, this affects the approach the secondary school teacher uses in his regular classes and, to some extent, that of the elementary teacher. It would be difficult to measure the point at which this effect stops, or even to recognize its existence in many cases. Moreover, such subtle changes in methods of presentation may have no effect at all on curricular planning.

One real indirect effect of advanced placement courses on curricular planning is financial. The courses are undeniably relatively expensive in terms of teaching

loads, laboratory equipment, and books for the library. A school which offers advanced courses may find that financial considerations are more restrictive than the examinations.

But there are salutary effects on curricula in both schools and colleges which are indirect outgrowths of the Advanced Placement Program. For too many years school and college curricula have been left to develop more or less independently. On the one hand, too much that the schools were doing did not take into account what was expected of their college-bound students (this has led, for instance, to the work of the College Board's Commission on Mathematics, and now the Commission on English). On the other hand, colleges have not sufficiently recognized what schools are doing. The student has been left in the middle, with gaps in his preparation in some places, and in others with dull freshman college courses which repeat much that he has had in high school.

One of the most important contributions of the Advanced Placement Program has been an increased communication between school and college teachers in various subject-matter fields. It cannot be claimed that the Program has solved all problems of articulation between school and college. But some progress has been made. School and college teachers cannot join in annual subject-matter conferences about advanced placement problems, or in committees to construct examinations, without experiencing increasing mutual respect for one another.

Probably the greatest contribution which the Advanced Placement Program has made to increased understanding between school and college teachers has come from the reading of the examinations. Each June a group of teachers

(Continued on page 71)

urgently needed, but just how resources are to be organized for its accomplishment is yet to be determined. Persons interested in participating in a project of this kind should make their intentions known to the ASCD Office in Washington, D.C., or to the Chairman of the Commission on Evaluation.

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Advanced Placement

(Continued from page 33)

(this year some 250, equally divided between schools and colleges) meets at Rider College to read the essay sections of the more than 20,000 papers. The work is arduous, but the contact is stimulating. The pay is not high, but most teachers are eager to come back year after year. These reading sessions inevitably affect the way the teachers concerned plan their work.

Attention thus far has been focused

on the impact of the Advanced Placement Program on curricular planning at the secondary level. The Program has almost as much effect on the colleges which receive the students. Just as there is no such thing as *the* college preparatory curriculum, *the* college freshman curriculum is no more than a myth. Colleges must, therefore, accommodate their course offerings to the content of advanced placement courses. In almost all cases, the colleges which have had experience with the Program do this gladly. In a few colleges, about half of the entering freshmen qualify for advanced placement in one or more courses; as many as 10 percent qualify for admission directly to the sophomore year. In these colleges, the impact on curricular planning, both for the colleges and the students, is as great as it is in any secondary school.

Ten years ago, the School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing was experimental. Today the Advanced Placement Program is an established fact, widely acclaimed by leading educators. The Program is by no means perfect, nor is it the only means for challenging the superior student, or of enriching his academic experience. The examinations definitely influence the planning of the curriculum in schools choosing to participate in the Program. Most educators agree that much of the influence is good, but compromises may be recognized. These compromises are ultimately for the benefit of the student; they are, in reality, indications of increased school-college cooperation on the student's behalf. Above all, the compromises are symbolic of increasing measures of the precious commodity of correspondence, which alone can make the education of our young people a continuum.

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