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Introduction

Amid the enduring mediocrity of American secondary schooling and the nonstop caravan of reforms, experiments, and pilot programs intended to fix it, there lurks a sixty-year-old success that has not drawn the attention or plaudits that it deserves. Now engaging nearly three million high school students who sit for some five million exams every year, the Advanced Placement program has quietly worked its way into the offerings of most public and private schools, the policies of many states and districts, the admissions and placement decisions of hundreds of universities, the educational aspirations of countless families, and the academic programs of innumerable college students. Along the way, it has emerged as a nearly unique standard of rigor and quality for the K–12 system, a source of professional gratification for myriad teachers, and—remarkable in these fractured and politicized times—a de facto national high school curriculum joined to a battery of exacting tests that are widely deemed "worth teaching to."

Unlike charter schools, "dropout recovery" schools, and virtual schools, Advanced Placement is not a newfangled institutional form. Unlike—though intersecting with—today's enthusiasms for personalized learning and online instruction, AP is not a pedagogical or technological novelty. Unlike "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top," AP is not a federal program or mandate. Unlike the "Common Core," it is not something that states impose on reluctant school systems and teachers. Rather, it's a privately operated, mostly privately financed, and almost entirely voluntary curricular option for high schools and their teachers and students, one that's been competently

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managed and adroitly led by the nonprofit, nonpartisan College Board. As such, AP enjoys an excellent reputation and is broadly popular among both parents and educators, including many who bridle at other items on today's reform agendas. It has mostly avoided the politics and fads that roil contemporary American public education, even as it has gradually evolved into a significant player in the longest-running and most compelling reform impulse of all: to widen educational opportunity and foster upward mobility for disadvantaged youngsters.

For several decades after its founding in the mid-twentieth century, AP was a modest venture, scarcely visible on the K–12 scene, that conferred extra advantages on a relative handful of already-fortunate kids attending a short list of exclusive private and posh suburban public high schools. Within those well-heeled surrounds, AP offered college-level courses to able, motivated pupils in a limited array of subjects, followed by exams that gauged their mastery of that material, potentially leading to degree credit on matriculation. (Author Finn used it in 1962 to skip his freshman year of college.)

Today, however, Advanced Placement's profile is far higher and markedly different: A host of policies, auxiliary programs, and booster organizations have widened access to it. Not only is its scale vastly greater, its cadres are also much more diverse, both demographically and geographically, and it's being deployed strategically in many places to strengthen the secondary schooling and postsecondary prospects of poor and minority youngsters who long lacked access to high-level coursework.

For them, as for its original population of course- and exam-takers, participation in Advanced Placement can bring multiple benefits: One's scores may yield stronger odds of gaining admission to the university of one's choice, the chance to skip entry-level classes after matriculating, and actual credit toward one's degree. Along the way, AP supplies intellectual challenges to able students, affords them additional academic choices, and enables them to go further and deeper in subjects that interest them than is possible in standard curricula. It creates opportunities for motivated teachers to stretch themselves while gaining valuable professional development and colleagueship. Carefully deployed, it can tone up and revitalize entire high schools and, sometimes, the middle schools that feed them. For College Board leaders, as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman recently noted, it's even a means for ensuring that more young people enter adulthood having already accessed the "two codes" they view as central to successful lives and good citizenship in today's America: computer science and the US Constitution.[1]

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As it shoulders these multiple missions, however, and pursues goals that go far beyond its initial raison d'être, the AP program confronts sizable challenges. It must navigate the ideological and curricular rapids that flow from academe into the K–12 system, and it must seek viable truces in the culture wars that rock a number of disciplines so that its courses can continue both to satisfy the demands of universal public education at the secondary level and to qualify for course credits and placements at the college level.

Delivering on AP's promise also grows palpably harder as the program expands and diversifies: finding—and preparing—a sufficiency of qualified and willing teachers across the almost forty subjects in the current catalog; ensuring that school principals and district leaders are fully bought into the multiple challenges both of implementing AP in the high schools and satisfactorily preparing more youngsters before they even get there; fending off critics who would rather devote all available resources to low achievers and struggling learners; retaining the loyalty of upscale parents who fear that their kids' AP experience (and advantage) may be dimmed by the inclusion of "those other" students; dealing with the blowback from AP's democratization as some exclusive private schools and colleges begin to shun it; and contending with a surge of rival offerings (notably "dual enrollment" programs) that seem to promise easier access to surer college credit.

How is the College Board handling such dilemmas? Can one program juggle so many balls? As AP enlarges its footprint and extends its mission, how well is it preserving the features that made it worth expanding in the first place, particularly its unapologetic rigor, its commitment to liberal education, and its stealthy furnishing of quality education choices? How acute is the tension between accelerating proven high achievers and assisting a diverse population of kids to get a leg up on college? How effective is AP, actually, in those roles today, as it evolves from a low-profile elite option to a big-time reform strategy for policy and philanthropy?

Can AP sustain its acclaimed high standard at a time when most state academic standards are rising even as there's intensifying pressure to ease passing scores, inflate grades, "recover credit," and push everyone through to graduation, matriculation, and college degrees? Can it retain its coast-to-coast acceptance as authority over standards, assessment, and accountability shift from Washington back to the states—and as anything resembling a national curriculum seems politically taboo? Can it sustain its integrity—and expanded market—as competitors get more traction? Can it preserve the respect in which it has been widely held as its very scale and giant revenue stream lead more critics to hurl stones at it?

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Closer to the ground, how are actual schools and school systems—both longtime users and those new to the enterprise—dealing with today's Advanced Placement program? How are they accommodating—or initiating—moves to bring it within range of more kids and to advance equity as well as achievement? Why are some private schools turning their backs on it even as some charter-school networks build it into every student's program?

From its modest beginnings, AP has grown enormously in response to popularity among teachers and parents, ambition (and competition) among students, and pressure from many directions to expand access to its courses and add more subjects to its catalog. Today, the College Board estimates, about one-fifth of recent US graduates have scored a "qualifying score" (3 or better on a scale of 1 to 5) on at least one AP test during their high school years.

Many of these young people do in fact obtain some credit and can thereby expedite or deepen their undergraduate education and possibly cut its cost. Yet some colleges—looking to their own revenues, enrollments, and faculty preferences—have lately made this harder to get. Meanwhile, the competition to gain admission to those very institutions has intensified so that even students who don't "qualify" on AP exams are keen to display its courses on their high school transcripts as evidence of their commitment to embracing challenge and grappling with rigor. Still, with large fractions of AP's new participants, particularly black and Latino youngsters, faring poorly on those exams, it's important to ask how much satisfaction to take from wider access when that's accompanied by lower rates of success. This dilemma resurfaces several times in the pages that follow, until we settle our own view of it in the final chapter.

An easy remedy would be to make AP exams easier to pass, but the program's five-point scale may be the closest thing American education has to a "platinum yardstick," an unbending standard of intellectual attainment in high school at a time when state standards, assessments, passing scores, grading practices, and graduation requirements are all in flux. Its association with resolute quality is a major source of AP's popularity with so many families, guidance counselors, policy makers, and philanthropists.

Because Advanced Placement is uniform, externally validated, and respected for its rigor, helping more students participate and succeed in it is the goal of numerous ventures. For many education reformers, opening its gates wider has become a means to equalize opportunity, expand college participation and completion, strengthen America's human capital, and foster upward mobility. Some also prize its ability to assist gifted students who

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crave more than the standard curriculum and bored kids who otherwise spin their intellectual wheels during the last year or two of high school. Others see AP expansion as a "rising tide" that can lift entire schools. More and more districts and several states cover the costs not only of the AP courses and those who teach them but also of the fees for students taking AP exams.

Although dustups occur now and then over individual subjects, AP's catalog of courses and exams has generally avoided the controversies that typically confound anything that smacks of national curriculum or testing in the United States, although such systems have long existed with minimal ruckus in other high-performing countries. Advanced Placement threads this needle because it's voluntary, not something imposed by government; because its creators and operators serve a private outfit with no political coloration; and because it's not a total curriculum. Rather, it's an array of courses that no school teaches in its entirety and that no student comes close to taking all of. Within each course, a fair amount of discretion is left to classroom teachers, which also causes most educators to value and take pride in teaching it, rather than resenting and opposing it.

Advanced Placement has also functioned as a welcome source of choice within American secondary education—not choice among schools as much as options among courses, teachers, and levels of intellectual challenge. Because it doesn't "threaten the system" like charter schools or vouchers, it hasn't faced the acrimony that we associate with other forms of choice. As it expands, however, and moves more prominently into other reform crusades, draws on more funding, and encounters more competition, it garners greater attention and controversy.

The flood of college-credit options during the high school years also alarms some professors, bursars, and registrars, even as more of their own postsecondary institutions seek to supply (and profit from) such options. At the same time, the still-uneven distribution of these options (and access to them) across the K–12 landscape worries advocates and policy makers who focus on educational equity.

The Advanced Placement program, in short, besides having become a very big deal, has turned into something of an education Rorschach test, playing multiple roles, aspiring to diverse goals, and surfacing a number of fault lines as well as opportunities. One can see in it at least a partial solution to many different problems and can glimpse progress on many fronts. One can also detect signs of reluctance and resistance on a number of those fronts.

Now well into its sixties, AP today warrants a biography—the clear-eyed but friendly kind—and that's what we've undertaken. In the pages that

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follow, we review its history, examine its workings on the ground, discuss alternatives (and rivals) to it, delve into the major issues that it faces today, and consider the sizable contributions it can—and cannot—make to the future of American education.

Notes

1. Thomas L. Friedman, "The Two Codes Your Kids Need to Know," *New York Times*, February 12, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/opinion/college-board-sat-ap.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage.

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