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Got AP?

JOAN DIGBY

LIU Post

One of the first questions I ask prospective students is whether they have taken any AP or college courses in high school. The question itself frequently generates lines of tension in a student's face while parents erupt into proud smiles. The difference can generally tell me whose idea it was to take AP or college courses and to what degree they considered them a benefit in gaining college admission and scholarship funding.

Families, especially those considering sending their children to a private four-year university, need all the help they can get in funding college. At my institution, four years without any scholarship support costs around \$142,000, not including room and board. Families with two or more siblings can double or triple this number and anticipate a mountain of debt. Annmarie Guzy's essay powerfully spells out the financial benefits that accrue from using AP courses to satisfy college credits and how states have begun to legislate quite terrifying directives mandating the acceptance of "uniform minimum AP . . . credits." The essential issue—"seismic" as Guzy has aptly put it—boils down to money, probably even more for students headed toward private colleges and universities than those enrolling in state schools.

Naturally, families search for strategies to bring down the cost of college as well as the time it takes to complete a degree. Taking college courses or AP courses in high school facilitates this plan. Both are offered at rates cheaper than college tuition, and they often permit a student to cut out as much as one whole semester. Although bringing in even more credit may be on the rise as Guzy suggests, I have not yet experienced a student bringing in a whole year. Perhaps that will come soon.

My university does accept AP credit, and I do permit students to apply this credit against core requirements, even honors college core requirements so long as scores on the AP exams meet department standards. Many liberal arts and social science departments accept a 3 or better on the AP exam; the science departments—good for them, bad for Texas—require a 4 or 5. Since we want to attract students rather than point them in the direction of our other regional competitors, the most practical course of action is to compliment and reward students for their choice to do AP or other college-level work in high school. Many of them are excited about these classes even when generally bored with high school and ready to move on; they are the ones who mirror their parents' smiles and talk about inspiring AP teachers, who, as Guzy suggests, are not always the norm.

Despite some cheerleaders—"Give us an A, give us a P / How much money will the scholarship be?"—AP courses generally come with a reputation for being oppressive. Both parents and students, even those enjoying the challenge, frequently present the classes as endurance trials that have made them lift heavy academic loads. For those of us concerned with time management, this background of heavy lifting can be a positive factor. AP courses are reputed to assign endless homework and extensive reading whereas any reading seems too much for the majority of a media-driven student body. According to the marketing strategy of the College Board, the rigor of AP courses is designed to prove that they really are Advanced and will earn those who complete them a desirable college Placement.

AP courses live up to this ideal only if the courses are taught well and if students do well. As Guzy has pointed out, AP is often an assigned workload for which teachers might have little training. Since I believe in anecdotal information, I am not going to search for statistics in this area, but from my own experience in recruiting students who have taken AP English, I can say that they have often read more classical works of British and European literature than many taking so-called college English classes with reading lists of modern American novels and media pieces. My two-semester honors freshman

English seminar combines writing with comparative world literature from *Gilgamesh* to contemporary poets whom I invite to read, so I favor the classic syllabi of many AP classes. On the other hand, when it comes to writing, AP and college English courses taught in high schools appear to work from the same old model of the five-paragraph essay that takes the next three years to break. Further, these students quickly forget the basics of grammar, punctuation, and citation, putting all freshmen back on the same level playing field.

When I ask students for the grades they earned on AP exams, usually those taken in their sophomore or junior years, some reveal in shame that they only made a 2 or that they never paid to have them count toward college. Typically such students were pressured into taking AP courses by friends, teachers, or family; in the frightening example cited by Guzy, they were even paid to take them. On the other hand, some students flourish in the AP environment and beg for the honors college to “bring it on” even more intensely—which is not at all what I have in mind! I like to respond by saying that the decision to join the honors college should be based on engagement in a community of students and faculty who share similar interests, ideals, and passions. One of the first lessons of college should be to take courses not simply with “a short professor who wears glasses” but with an actual person who might one day become a thesis advisor and possibly a lifelong mentor. I try to move students who are focused on their credentials away from running the gauntlet to relaxing into a new academic society.

Honors programs and colleges have good reasons for accepting AP credit. The financial benefit for families is the most basic, along with the natural inclination of students engaged in AP courses to seek honors opportunities. Rather than worrying about what they might miss by having completed requirements before immersion in college, I focus on possible gains. For students majoring in disciplines that have a rigid sequence of courses such as at my university Music/Music Education, Theater/Musical Theater, Nutrition, and Social Work, completing part of the core in high school makes room for some advanced honors electives that students need before they embark on research and an undergraduate honors thesis in the major. For students entering departments with more flexible courses of study, having a cushion of core courses taken in high school opens up greater possibilities for study abroad or internships as part of their undergraduate education. Thus, for many reasons I am in favor of accepting AP credit rather than taking the position that they have wasted both time and money. These classes can help boost self-esteem and academic confidence. I do not want to be the person to diminish what they have achieved.

That said, AP classes and so-called “college classes” in high school are nothing like college equivalents. I was a “cooperating teacher,” a periodic visitor supervising our freshman English courses in many schools on Long Island for more than twenty years. While I learned what it is like to start class at 7:00am, eat lunch at 9:00, and pore over *Hamlet* on film with increasing boredom for more than two months, I never found much similarity with sections of college English taught on campus. For one thing, college courses do not meet five days a week for forty-minute periods, making it impossible to get discussion going or in-class essay-writing done after attendance roll calls, school announcements on the PA system, homework assignments, and general chatter. Furthermore, teachers spoon-fed students with notes on the blackboard focused on preparation for the final validating tests required in high school. On all my visits, I insisted on giving college-style lectures or holding seminar discussions that digressed from the daily routine. I tried to teach students how to take a running set of notes while listening and participating. A few of the teachers taught with me, but most retreated to the back of the room to do their own preparations and get some relief from a long, grueling day. I could never have survived a career in this environment, so I applaud those who have inspired their students.

Professors who meet with and work with students in the high schools have the benefit of talking about their institutions, a nice marketing ploy for recruitment, and informing students about their discipline, explaining what a particular major might offer with respect to content and career possibilities. I often interview students who have already taken a college course in accounting, forensic science, or chemistry and are thinking about a choice of major at LIU Post based on a positive high school experience. The fact that they arrive with some projected focus helps them get off to a dynamic start even though they may change direction and major.

When I talk with prospective honors students about their high school AP or college classes, I let them know that the college experience of core courses will be very different from high school. Classes will meet twice a week; professors will typically assume that everything is important, so students will have to take copious notes on their own; whole texts may be assigned to be covered in a week or two; and most of all, students are on their own. The idea of owning books and being able to take notes in the margin seems almost crazy to students who have always borrowed school texts and been told not to write in them so that they come back unscarred at the end of the year. Some of these issues are disappearing as students migrate to material online, but my

essential point is that college is in every way different from high school, even from high school classes that pretend to be college.

My greatest fear is that college itself is pretending to be higher education. AP and other fast-track schemes seem based on Lady Macbeth's premise about murder that "twere well it were done quickly." Such schemes are just the edge of a more harrowing discussion current in the media about whether a college degree is a credential worth having. Society appears to be flooded with people who earn more money without a college degree, giving families some reason to doubt the efficacy of spending all that money on a college education. Think about the marketing language now widely used to attract students. Within the last year, colleges have become "incubators" for "entrepreneurship," teaching students to be "successful." The idea of teaching students how to think and how to expand their intellectual and cultural world has been overwhelmed by utilitarian ends. Even honors programs are having more difficulty in "selling" advanced electives in philosophy and history that don't appear "useful." Over the next decade we can expect undergraduate education—if it survives—to devolve into an alien form. I try to stay in the present and not to let my imagination leap into that dystopia.

Thus, when I review the information sheet that students who qualify for admission to the honors college are asked to fill out, I factor in AP classes along with so-called college classes they took in high school. A background in such classes is usually not as compelling as students' talents and experiences—working with special-needs children, making films, being an Eagle Scout, speaking three languages, breaking green horses, or training for opera—but is surely part of the mix. We must hope, at least, that students with wide ranges of interest will keep college real.

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