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Margaret Walsh

Keene State College, mwalsh@keene.edu

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AP: Not a Replacement for Challenging College Coursework

MARGARET WALSH

Keene State College

College affordability is weighing heavily this year on the minds of students, parents, faculty, and the U.S. electorate. Intent on saving money on college tuition as well as impressing college admissions committees, high-achieving students frequently start college-level work early through Advanced Placement courses. However, these courses do not replace the learning that takes place in college-level honors courses. For honors students, making the transition between high school and college means finding opportunities to learn in new ways, taking risks, and diving deeper into ideas.

For more than fifteen years I have been a professor of sociology at a public liberal arts college with an honors program. Advising students and seeing them graduate to pursue meaningful careers in education, science, and the arts is the most rewarding part of my teaching career. My daughter, who is a high school senior at a rural public high school, has completed several Advanced Placement courses and a dual enrollment course at a local college. In recent

conversations, we have shared perceptions of the role of honors education in high school and college. Our different vantage points have led us to consider the purpose of Advanced Placement courses, the motivation of students who complete them, and what is in the best interest of students, honors programs, and colleges in awarding credit for AP and similar programs.

Some readers may remember their own experiences in high school AP courses. In the 1980s, the small school I attended offered only two AP options in the senior year, English and calculus. Most of my friends and I were among the first in our families to apply to college, and teachers said that these courses were important for our futures. We did not question them. Research from that era of the College Board found that students who sat for an AP exam in high school earned honors and higher grades in college compared to their peers with similar academic abilities not enrolled in AP ("AP Students Excel" 3). Now, more than half of all high school students are taking these courses, many as early as their sophomore year of high school. Research supports what my teachers used to tell me: that earning high scores on AP exams correlates with improved college performance, and, on a 2004 Gallop survey, students reported that AP courses reinforced their self-perception as being "above average" and "self-motivated" (Mason).

The College Board now lists thirty-eight different Advanced Placement exam areas including languages, math, natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. An increasing number of schools are feeling pressure to offer more AP courses to a wider range of students. A downside, though, is that these courses are shaped by a standardized recommended curriculum, and teachers may not have the freedom to supplement their courses with quality experiences that allow for creativity and insight. The test looms.

Since cost reduction is a major incentive for students to take AP courses, an important issue is the rise in college tuition. In a recent National Public Radio interview, journalist Claudio Sanchez asks author Sandy Baum whether the rising cost of higher education has reached the crisis level. Baum responded that student debt is a real problem but mainly for students who are not well prepared and not well advised. For example, she found that older students, non-matriculated students, and students who leave before finishing their degrees are all at risk. Also, when students choose majors without the guidance that helps them link coursework to professional opportunities, they are likely to have difficulty getting established in careers with competitive salaries to pay off their loans. Baum says, "They tend to come from disadvantaged, middle-income families and they're struggling. [But] not because they owe a lot of money" (Sanchez).

In *USA Today*, Derek Thompson reported that the cost of college in New Hampshire, where I live and teach, is among the highest in the country. In 2014, 76 percent of graduating seniors carried an average debt of \$33,410. These figures vary substantially from state to state and by type of institution. For-profit institutions have students with the largest loan burden and the lowest degree completion rates, creating a problematic “debt without degree” scenario (Thompson). Thompson also points to the decrease in state support and the increase in tuition at public colleges as well as the marketing of for-profit institutions as contributing to the student debt crisis. Based on current research, the focus should be on ensuring that students make informed choices and that they graduate so that their investment can pay off not only in earnings but also in intellectual growth and personal accomplishment.

To understand the perspective of a high school student, my daughter suggested I look at the website *College Confidential* <<http://www.collegeconfidential.com>>, a free Internet message board that is popular with U.S. college-bound students and their parents. Many of the participants are seeking admission to the most selective public and private colleges and universities in the country, and they share opinions and information on a range of topics from admission criteria to tuition costs and scholarships.

On visiting the website, I first noticed that these students are savvy. In the thousands of posts and replies, students provide advice about using the summer to begin preparing for the course or exam on their own or give tips on the most useful books, guides, YouTube videos, and websites. In other threads, students compare AP summer assignments, which are typically projects, chapter summaries, or problems to solve that vary widely from school to school. The threads often include general discussion about teacher quality, mostly centering on concerns that their AP teacher will be “really bad,” a judgment that may mean “too easy” or “too hard.” Some students are fixated on getting “5s,” the highest possible test score. Some students devise schemes to get into the better teachers’ classes when more than one section of an AP course is offered at their school. While users share general anxieties about Advanced Placement courses at the high school level, they write from different states and contexts—private and public institutions, rural and urban environments, large and small districts.

What students posting on *College Confidential* rarely share is learner engagement in the course material, which is and should be the central concern of honors. Despite all of the hand wringing about college preparation, controlling costs, and maximizing student success, honors programs and colleges should preserve, for instance, the educational enrichment offered in a

first-year experience once students have arrived at college and should then include diverse offerings that meet the needs of students who have taken AP courses as well as those who have not. In 2011, Annmarie Guzy made a powerful case that regardless of AP scores, honors students need time to develop their analytical and writing abilities. Students spend far too little time on research and writing in most high schools, so, as she put it, “You don’t want to have the writing style of an eighteen-year-old high school senior forever, do you?” (68) Students who have done advanced work in high school and who enter college with academic and possibly financial advantages should be poised to enter a new phase of learning: to shift their focus from getting *out of* course requirements to getting *into* new and different courses to advance their capacity to learn.

In the college honors program where I teach, students begin their first college semester together in a “thinking and writing” course that focuses, for instance, on the theme of encountering adulthood; they later travel as a group in a course on global engagement that may take them on a journey with faculty to such places as Nepal, Ecuador, South Africa, Romania, Belize, or Bosnia; and they complete a senior capstone seminar that gives them a chance to communicate across disciplines, seeing links among majors such as education, environmental science, or math. These courses all meet general education requirements, and they do not involve high-stakes multiple choice and essay tests at the end.

High school graduates expect college to be challenging and interesting, and we have an obligation to offer experiences—e.g., mentoring, research, leadership, and professional development—that will serve them well in an unknown future. Students who have taken AP classes have gained self-confidence, shown initiative, and made a good impression; now they no longer need to accelerate their education. They need to deepen it. They are starting a new phase of learning that requires new strategies so that, as honors students, they can experiment, expand, and refocus. Honors faculty must do the same, growing from a strong foundation and preserving the value of learning while moving forward resiliently in a changing environment.

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The author may be contacted at
mwalsh@keene.edu.

