

The Advanced Placement Program is Missing Something: Underrepresentation of Latinx Students in AP Classes

Throughout the semester, George Mason University's College of Education and Human Development course, "Critical Perspectives in Education" explored various reforms and programs in American schools, following their progression from creation and implementation to reauthorizations and even discontinuation. This education policy course examines the historical development of education in the United States, analyzing the social, political, cultural, and economic forces that have influenced reform initiatives in schools. In considering which specific program to deep dive into for this assignment, thinking about the different advanced program options available to students in the K-12 space became the starting point. This particular subject interests me as a high school educator with years of experience working in various high schools in Virginia, with differing advanced program options for students. In Virginia, these programs include Governor's School, Dual Enrollment, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge Programme, and Advanced Placement.¹ Governor's School is a statewide program that "centers on best practices in the field of gifted education and the presentation of advanced content to able learners."² Dual Enrollment is a program that allows high school students to take college-level courses at a participating state college or university, with these courses counting toward both a high school diploma and college degree simultaneously.³ The International Baccalaureate program offers a continuum of international education through four challenging, high quality educational programmes to students aged 3 to 19 at schools worldwide.⁴ The Cambridge Programme is an international pre-university curriculum and examination system that can be

tailored to students' interests and abilities.⁵ Advanced Placement (AP) is a program run by College Board that “gives students the chance to tackle college-level work while they are still in high school and earn college credit and placement.”⁶

Being as though much of my advanced program knowledge is in the College Board’s Advanced Placement program, *known as AP*, the choice was made to let that program be the focus of my research interest. While the AP program aimed to create opportunities for ambitious students in high school, there is a history of disproportionate access and success, and systemic barriers—specifically for Black and Latinx populations of students—something believed to have strong roots in how the AP program was designed/implemented.⁷

College Board’s AP program is a niche program that came about during the Space Race era. Its origins began in 1952 as an opportunity—through the *Committee on Admission with Advanced Standing*—for students to save time in the pursuit of Bachelor’s degrees by “providing ambitious high school students the opportunity to take college-level classes and exams while still in high school.”⁸ In 1954, the first AP exams were administered with approximately 500+ high school students sitting for them.⁹ At that time, course offerings were limited to advanced studies in eleven subject matters only: English composition, literature, Latin, French, German, Spanish, history, mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics.¹⁰ Each subject had a committee of secondary teachers and college professors to define standards of achievement for their respective subjects and ultimately the twelve participating colleges gave partial or full credit.¹¹ The institutions that formed the *Committee on Admission with Advanced Standing* consisted of the

presidents and deans of the following schools: Bowdoin, Brown, Carleton, Haverford, Kenyon, M.I.T., Middlebury, Oberlin, Swarthmore, Wabash, Wesleyan, and Williams.¹² Test takers were scored on the same 1-5 scale as current AP exams. A year later in 1955, the College Board took over testing and launched the AP program as we know it today.¹³

College Board now offers AP classes in six different domains with the numerals in parentheses being how many different courses are offered in that domain: Arts (6), English (2), History & Social Sciences (10), Math & Computer Science (10), Sciences (8), and World Languages & Cultures (8). Including the two Capstone classes offered, brings the total number of classes available to forty-six compared to the eleven offered in AP's infancy.¹⁴ AP classes and exams offer students the benefits of standing out in the college admissions game, earning college credit and advanced placements from day one, and even a GPA boost in high school, among other perks.¹⁵ In a decentralized education system like ours in the U.S., where there is substantial variance in schooling standards, the continuity that the AP program offers is a positive as, "AP scores mean the same thing whether you are in New York or Louisiana"¹⁶

Since its inception, the AP program has demonstrated significant growth and expansion with more subjects being offered and increased numbers of students participating in AP courses and exams.¹⁷ By the late twentieth century, AP classes had become a staple in many high schools across the U.S.¹⁸ Despite the AP program being prevalent in high schools around the country, its access—specifically availability, enrollment, and achievement in its classes and exams tends to disproportionately favor White, Asian, and higher-income students compared to Black, Latinx,

and Native American students.¹⁹ Latinx students, as the research shows, “demonstrate significant differences in comparison to their White and Asian peers in the following areas: standardized testing, college preparation, high school graduation, and college completion” which contributes to the disparities in who takes AP classes and exams.²⁰ Differing levels of access are the first potential barrier to AP classes.

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, determined by parental education and income levels, are more likely to take AP classes and exams in comparison to students from lower SES backgrounds.²¹ Unfortunately, low-income students comprise nearly half of the U.S. public school population but represented only 21.7 percent of students who passed AP tests in 2014.²² The history of this disproportionate access, specifically of Black and Latinx populations of students, is something believed to have strong roots in how the AP program was designed/implemented.²³

The Systemic Barriers to the AP program

Many Latinx students are concentrated in school districts where students and schools lack the necessary resources for them to access advanced courses like those in the AP program.²⁴ The underrepresentation of Latinx students in AP classes can be attributed to different factors including the process and costs to schools/districts offering AP classes, the costs to families, disparities in who sits for the classes and exams, and even where a school is geographically.²⁵

Choosing to offer AP requires several steps in the process for schools and begins with the school administrators who assess things like student interest, resources, and the school's

academic goals.²⁶ Having qualified teachers is another part of the process, given that the College Board sets specific requirements including subject-matter expertise for those who teach their classes.²⁷ Incorporating AP classes into a school's master schedule, and accounting for teacher availability, student class selections, and class size are also parts of the process.²⁸ Like anything else in education, schools need to evaluate their AP program—considering feedback from teachers and students and student performance data such as AP exam scores to justify their continued AP offerings.²⁹

There are several costs that schools offering AP classes can incur, potentially creating a further divide in access to Latinx students due to limited resources within individual schools and districts. One of the major costs incurred by schools is sending teachers to AP Summer Institutes—required training designated by the AP program for teachers to teach those classes—and also includes registration fees and materials, expenses for travel depending on where they are offered, and substitute coverage as needed if training is offered during the school year.³⁰ Due to the increased workload demands, some schools give stipends to teachers agreeing to teach AP classes.³¹ In addition, AP classes also require specialized materials like specific textbooks, and in some cases, lab supplies, software, and other instructional materials, each varying by course.³² As such, schools need to dedicate funds for the maintenance and/or replacement of these supplemental items over time. In some schools subsidized exam fees for students with demonstrated financial need or participation in fee reduction programs offered by College Board help ameliorate the costly burden to students and their families.³³ Low-income schools, which

tend to have higher numbers of Latinx students, may be unable to subsidize these exam fees, thus creating a barrier for students to take the test.³⁴ Overall, offering AP classes provides academic opportunities for students, however, it can simultaneously create burdensome costs for schools to ensure the quality of the college-level instruction that AP provides.

Schools facing difficulties with these additional costs may limit course offerings or participation in the AP program altogether, further limiting access for Latinx students in low-income and rural schools alike.³⁵ This is not an inequity that schools/districts are willing to continue to just allow though and are taking it to court for judges to decide. A lawsuit filed by the ACLU on behalf of Inglewood High School in California, claimed that because of their large Black and Latinx student population, they only offered three AP classes versus Beverly Hills High School with their predominantly White student body offering forty-five AP classes.³⁶ As a result of the lawsuit, the state legislature committed to increased access to AP classes at all high schools statewide. Other cases of educational inequity and the AP program have been filed over the years via the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (USDE-OCR) from all over the country including NJ and AL.³⁷

In addition to costs for the school, taking AP classes come with costs to the student. These costs come in the form of varied exam fees, depending on where students live and which exam is being taken—currently ranging from \$98-\$146 per exam.³⁸ At these costs, sitting for AP exams could be cost-prohibitive for Latinx students and their families, who may already be deemed low-income due to family dynamics. In the case that students/families can afford that price point, it may be a determining factor in how many exams a student can take. There are also

costs for course materials, which vary by course, and for test prep materials and courses, which are optional, but aid in student success rates on the culminating exams.³⁹

Geographical locations and school sizes are additional factors that can be inclusionary or exclusionary for students in AP programs. A study conducted by the Center for American Progress looked at AP course offerings related to school enrollment numbers, racial/ethnic demographics, and geographic locations.⁴⁰ Schools with higher enrollment numbers tend to offer more AP classes versus those with smaller numbers and in more rural communities.⁴¹ The study, which analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education's 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) on almost 16 million students illustrates that there is a sizable gap in access opportunities to the AP program. Within this dataset, nearly 15 percent of the students went to high schools that did not offer any AP classes. Looking at some state-specific data showed how opposite the trends were in Mississippi and Virginia for example.⁴² According to the report, 86 percent of students in the former attended high schools with 10 or fewer AP courses, while in the latter, 73 percent attended high schools offering 11+ AP classes.⁴³

While participating in the AP program has benefits for all students concerning college preparedness and academic achievement, outside of AP Spanish Language and Culture, many Latinx students do not access AP due to various systemic barriers.⁴⁴ It is common knowledge that the AP program primarily helps already privileged students. Even as the program expands, it still largely serves affluent, predominantly white high schools.⁴⁵

This is a sad reality that has been witnessed firsthand in my 15+ years as a high school educator. These systemic barriers—include costs, home language, lack of teacher recommendations, lack of information, limited course offerings, and a lack of academic support among other things, furthering the inaccessibility of Latinx students.⁴⁶ Some of these barriers are intertwined—like home language and lack of support, and some are not, yet all of them can pose a detriment to a student’s chances at AP participation and success.

Ideas on How to Level the AP Playing Field

While the underrepresentation of Latinx students in AP classes is not a new struggle, the various strategies to attract and retain Latinx students, seem to fall on the schools/districts themselves with little support from College Board other than ideas on their website. Creating equity within this space can start to be addressed by the following—expansion of course offerings to be more culturally relevant and representative, more teacher training on diverse student populations, outreach and awareness for families on the AP program and its benefits, support for English Language Learners (ELLs) such as materials in their native language, and fee reduction programs via different funding sources.

The expansion of course offerings to be more culturally relevant ultimately depends on how culturally competent school administrators and teachers are. To reach students and truly engage them with the material in these new course offerings, they need to feel connected to and represented in various aspects of the curriculum. More teacher training on diverse student populations is something that all schools/districts with diverse student populations should invest in. It must be a priority though. Our country is a very diverse place with all kinds of people who bring all kinds of varied life experiences. Having teachers who can teach different perspectives,

benefits everyone and allows students to engage with school and course materials in different ways. Representation matters.

Outreach and awareness about the AP program to families is going to require a concerted effort on the part of school leaders, AP teachers, school counseling departments, and students currently in the AP program. These different stakeholder groups bring different, yet important perspectives to the table. Part of the underrepresentation issues that Latinx students face is the fact that their families may have little to no information about AP or may only have assumptions about it. Combine that with the language barrier and it is not a shock that there may be little encouragement of AP coursework from their families.

Support for ELLs looking to take AP such as materials in their native language is one way to scaffold instruction for this specific student demographic. However, an ELL's English proficiency level will ultimately determine the level of support they will need and the amount of funding for additional staff and resources a school/district will need to provide.

This, however, is all easier said than done. Too many school districts around the country are underfunded and because of the niche nature of the AP program, funds cannot always be allocated to support underrepresented students in the ways they may need versus their higher-income peers, furthering the divide of the haves and have-nots. Subsidies for less wealthy schools/districts become one more hurdle to jump in the name of educational equity, as low-income, high-minority, and/or rural schools may not have the staffing and resources to dedicate to obtaining these supports. The College Board offers a fee reduction of \$36 per exam for eligible students, still leaving the cost at over \$60 per exam, a price tag that may limit how many tests a family can afford.⁴⁷ Schools/districts may also look at other avenues of funding such as grants from government agencies or foundations, partnerships with local businesses and post-

secondary institutions, and community organizations to offset the costs of course offerings, materials, fees, and growth of AP programs. Prioritization in budget funding helps sustain already established AP programs, and state and federal initiatives allow for growth and increased access for underrepresented populations like Latinx students.

AP's *All In* program identifies lower-income students who might be successful in AP classes—based on their PSAT scores—and then reaches out to those students (and their teachers and counselors) to persuade them to take the classes.⁴⁸ Between that and a combination of the strategies listed above—can help schools/districts make the AP program more accessible for more students. One cannot help thinking that given the lucrative nature of the AP program, College Board should be doing more and not leave it on the backs of the schools/districts offering their programs and based on the numbers. In 2015, College Board made \$916 million in revenue from its AP program with \$408 million coming from exam fees and materials alone.⁴⁹ This number will continue to grow as more schools and students take AP classes and exams, and fees for exams and materials continue to rise.

Taking an AP class and succeeding at it are two different things. And while the number of Latinx students taking AP classes may be increasing, the same cannot be said for the number of those students taking and passing the culminating exam. In 2016, when analyzing test participation and failure rates, the national trend showed 70+ percent of Black students and 57 percent of Latinx students who took an AP test, did not pass.⁵⁰ In the analysis conducted by the Center for American Progress' look at the 2015-16 USDE-CRDC data, Latinx high school students taking at least one AP test were less likely to receive at least one passing score—at all

levels of AP course offerings—than the White, Asian, and overall high school student population.⁵¹

Conclusion

All in all, the origin story of the AP program is one of advantage, rigor, prestige, and advanced collegiate placement for a select few—starting from its limited acceptance at a dozen schools to the worldwide name recognition it now touts via College Board. While it is much more inclusive on a scaled level than it was at its onset, it is still disproportionate in accessibility, availability, enrollment, achievement, and success among Latinx students in part due to a number of factors including the process and costs to schools/districts offering AP classes, the costs to families, disparities in who sits for the classes and exams, and even where a school is geographically.

And while this narrative does not have to continue to be the AP program’s legacy, it will take quite a bit of effort in terms of funding prioritization, support structures being implemented—at both school/district levels as well as state policy legislation, and an intentional push from various stakeholders to reverse the status quo.

Investiture in Latinx students taking AP classes is an investment in the future of the U.S. college student body, American workforce, and society—as the Latinx population continues to grow. Various academic studies including Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian (2005)⁵², Parra-Martinez et al. (2025)⁵³, and Liekar (2012)⁵⁴ all show that there are positive impacts on student success

overall in college for those that took AP classes in high school in comparison to those who did not. That success included better preparedness, higher college GPA's, and higher college graduation rates. Ultimately, furthering the critical thinking skills, knowledge base, and leadership potential of this growing demographic may not be a priority for all, but it should be.

ENDNOTES

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