Letters

Why are colleges restricting AP credit? There are many possible explanations beyond those suggested by Casement. They may simply be unfamiliar with the programs' strengths, or wanting to show themselves academically tougher than their rivals, or concerned that too much AP would cut back on their introductory courses, which provide jobs for their graduate students. We need more research before we adopt either Dr. Casement's or my theories.

But what he is saying does not fit what I have seen in hundreds of AP classes over the last two decades. AP teachers are much better at their jobs than he says they are. AP students, even sophomores and juniors, are much more capable of learning at an introductory college level than he says they are.

And if he does even a rudimentary survey of college and high school educators on whether they think the growth of the AP program should be encouraged, I think he will find strong support for the idea that AP is the best thing that high schools have done in 20 years to get students ready for college, and that its credibility is far from declining, but very much on the rise.

Jay Mathews, Columnist
The Washington Post

AP Is for the Prepared

To the editor:

In “Declining Credibility for the AP Program,” William Casement presents the wide array of AP policies at highly selective colleges and universities as a cause for alarm, or a sign of decreasing credibility. In fact, there’s little to suggest that AP’s credibility among colleges and universities is the issue at hand, and while we appreciate Dr. Casement’s exploration of the AP Program, his article omits key findings and includes a number of factual inaccuracies.

Dr. Casement paints a distorted picture of the rate at which students are taking AP Exams. While 75 percent of high school graduates are entering college, only 12 percent are completing a college preparatory curriculum, let alone a series of AP courses.1 Within the fraction of U.S. high school students who take AP courses, the modal number of AP Exams taken during their entire high school career by 2004’s graduates was just 1—a far cry from the 18 or 19 AP Exams taken by the students Dr. Casement suggests are representative. Here in the United States, we have much work to do to fortify our college-bound students with the high school curriculum the U.S. DoED’s research has found most likely to enable on-time completion of a bachelor’s degree.2

The College Board shares the concerns of educators who question the appropriateness of “dropping AP” into schools in which teachers and students haven’t been sufficiently prepared for the rigors of a college-level course, and urges educators to require students to take the prerequisites specified in the official AP Course Description. For example, students who take AP Biology should first have taken high school biology and high school chemistry. But because there are some schools that may offer these courses to unprepared students, we urge colleges and universities to review AP Exam grades when a student’s transcript indicates AP course participation. The AP Exam serves as the instrument of quality assurance for an AP course, calibrated as it is across years to maintain difficulty levels synchronized with performance of actual college students on the same questions.

Dr. Casement questions the validity of AP Exam scoring, without adequately understanding or describing the process by which grades are set. Each AP Exam consists not only of the free-response (essay or problem-solving) section Casement describes but also includes an extensive multiple-choice section that produces objective, reliable scores. Those scores are compared to the scores assigned by AP Readers—col-
lege faculty and AP teachers who read and grade unidentified booklets. Exam booklets may be routed for second readings, and discrepancies in score assignments are tracked electronically and resolved by additional readings. Studies show that the AP Reading is a highly reliable scoring process.

Contrary to what one of Dr. Casement’s sources says, the college faculties who validate the scoring process are not asked to attest that an AP grade of 3 should receive credit. Instead, statisticians use college comparability studies and equating items to recommend cut points, which delineate within the range of composite scores the points needed to receive an overall AP Exam grade of 5, 4, 3, 2, or 1. The college faculty are then asked to certify these cut points or make adjustments so that the students whose scores qualify them for a “3” are doing work equivalent to college students who receive grades ranging from a “middle C” to a “middle B” in the corresponding college course. Similarly, the students whose composite scores receive 4s should be doing work equivalent to college students who receive grades ranging from a “middle B” to a “middle A” in the corresponding college course.

Now that the AP population has grown and changed, Dr. Casement suggests the need for new data to demonstrate that AP students who skip a college course are still succeeding in the next sequential college course. We agree, and have just completed an analysis of the college performance of 72,000 students at 20 representative institutions from 1996-2001. The data continue to show that AP students scoring 3 or higher who skip the comparable college course are outperforming their classmates who did not. This study is available on the AP Central Web site, http://apcentral.collegeboard.com.

Regardless of how compelling such data may be, the College Board recognizes that just as there are a variety of types of higher education institutions, there will be a variety of AP policies, tailored to meet the specific needs of each institution. At a small percentage of highly selective institutions, it has become the norm for the transcripts of competitive applicants to include many AP Exam grades, and regardless of the reasons that those data might provide for placing a student ahead, it is hard to believe that such institutions would find the best interests of their students and institution served by a policy granting most of their incoming students sophomore standing. Thus, at many of these institutions, AP’s primary value for a student may be to demonstrate in the admissions process their ability to succeed in rigorous curricula. In fact, in 2003, William Fitzsimmons, dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Harvard, went on record as saying, “Perhaps the best standard predictor of academic success at Harvard is performance on AP or IB examinations.” Significantly, less than a third of students taking AP courses say that they’re participating in the AP because they hope to save time at college by earning college credit or advanced standing. In fact, a 2000 study showed that AP students were more likely than other students to take additional college courses in the subject areas of their AP classes.

The good news remains: More U.S. students than ever before are succeeding in college-level studies while still in high school. Colleges and universities will and should continue to make individual decisions about how best to use these results in recruiting, enrolling, and retaining students. The College Board is committed, unequivocally, to providing a program of rigor and quality, a national standard that will prepare students for college success. While the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that U.S. twelfth-grade students were lagging behind other students around the world in mathematics and science achievement, AP students were the exception, with even AP