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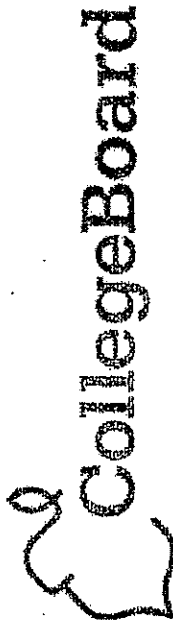
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## AP Classes Are a Scam

JOHN TIERNEY  
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*The College Board earns over half of all its revenues from the courses -- and, in an uncertain environment, students keep being suckered.*



## Advanced Placement Program

Fraudulent schemes come in all shapes and sizes. To work, they typically wear a patina of respectability. That's the case with Advanced Placement courses, one of the great frauds currently perpetrated on American high-school students.

That's a pretty strong claim, right? You bet. But why not be straightforward when discussing a scam the scale and audacity of which would raise Bernie Madoff's eyebrows?

The miscellany of AP courses offered in U.S. high schools under the imprimatur of the College Board probably started with good intentions. The idea, going back to the 1950s, was to offer college-level courses and exams to high-school students. The courses allegedly provide students the kind of rigorous academic experience they will encounter in college as well as an opportunity to earn college credit for the work.

Sounds pretty good. And every year, millions of high-school students enroll in the courses that are offered in 39 different subjects. They do so at an annual growth rate almost ten times the yearly percentage increase in the number of high school graduates. If there weren't something good about AP, would participation in the AP offerings be so high?

Interestingly, the evidence providing the clearest positive argument for AP participation is that high performance in AP courses correlates with better college grades and higher graduation rates, especially in science courses. But that's faint praise. It's the same as saying that students who do best in high school will do better in college and are more likely to graduate.

My beef with AP courses isn't novel. The program has a bountiful supply of critics, many of them in the popular press (see here and here), and many increasingly coming from academia as well (see here). The criticisms comport, in every particular, with my own experience of having taught an AP American Government and Politics course for ten years.

- AP courses are not, in fact, remotely equivalent to the college-level courses they are said to approximate. Before teaching in a high school, I taught for almost 25 years at the college level, and almost every one of those years my responsibilities included some equivalent of an introductory American government course. The high-school AP course didn't begin to hold a candle to any of my college courses. My

colleagues said the same was true in their subjects.

- The traditional monetary argument for AP courses — that they can enable an ambitious and hardworking student to avoid a semester or even a year of college tuition through the early accumulation of credits — often no longer holds. Increasingly, students don't receive college credit for high scores on AP courses; they simply are allowed to opt out of the introductory sequence in a major. And more and more students say that's a bad idea, and that they're better off taking their department's courses.
- The scourge of AP courses has spread into more and more high schools across the country, and the number of students taking these courses is growing by leaps and bounds. Studies show that increasing numbers of the students who take them are marginal at best, resulting in growing failure rates on the exams. The school where I taught essentially had an open-admissions policy for almost all its AP courses. I would say that two thirds of the students taking my class each year did not belong there. And they dragged down the course for the students who did.
- Despite the rapidly growing enrollments in AP courses, large percentages of minority students are essentially left out of the AP game. And so, in this as in so many other ways, they are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to college admissions.
- The AP program imposes "substantial opportunity costs" on non-AP students in the form of what a school gives up in order to offer AP courses, which often enjoy smaller class sizes and some of the better teachers. Schools have to increase the sizes of their non-AP classes, shift strong teachers away from non-AP classes, and do away with non-AP course offerings, such as "honors" courses. These opportunity costs are

real in every school, but they're of special concern in low-income school districts.

- To me, the most serious count against Advanced Placement courses is that the AP curriculum leads to rigid stultification — a kind of mindless genuflection to a prescribed plan of study that squelches creativity and free inquiry. The courses cover too much material and do so too quickly and superficially. In short, AP courses are a forced march through a preordained subject, leaving no time for a high-school teacher to take her or his students down some path of mutual interest. The AP classroom is where intellectual curiosity goes to die.

In short, somewhere along the way over the past half-century, the AP idea got corrupted.

Many critics lay the blame on the College Board itself, a huge "non-profit" organization that operates like a big business. The College Board earns over half of all its revenues from its Advanced Placement program — more than all its other revenue streams (SATs, SAT subject tests, PSATs) combined. The College Board's profits for 2009, the most recent year for which records were available, were 8.6 percent of revenue, which would be respectable even for a for-profit corporation. "When a non-profit company is earning those profits, something is wrong," says Americans for Educational Testing Reform. (The AETR's "report card" on the College Board awards a grade of D and cites numerous "areas of misconduct" by the College Board.)

It's clear the College Board has the mentality of a voracious corporation, charging \$89 a shot for an exam to millions of students who have no business taking it.

The college admissions process today is a total crapshoot. At least for the most competitive colleges, nobody in the applicant pool has any certainty

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anymore as to what will secure admission. In the face of that uncertainty, one rational form of behavior is to take the shotgun approach, blasting away at the admissions committee with every weapon in the student's armory: multiple AP courses, ridiculous amounts of extracurricular activity, and do-gooder volunteer work rivaling Mother Teresa's.

Lots of guidance counselors will advise families and students that a rational alternative is to opt out of that race. *Concentrate on one or two things. Excel at them.* I agree.

But it shouldn't be the customer's responsibility to stop a scam. The customer buys into it because the con artist is so skillful and the world is so uncertain. The only way to stop the College Boards of the world is to expose them. Tell people to be wary.

So, students and parents: beware.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOHN TIERNEY is a contributing writer for *The Atlantic* and a former professor of American government at Boston College. He is the author of *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (with Kay L. Schlozman) and *The U.S. Postal Service: Status and Prospects of a Government Enterprise*.

Response to AP Classes are a Scam

December 3, 2012

<http://www.npr.org/2012/12/03/166414595/op-ed-ap-classes-are-a-scam>

Official response from Trevor Packer, senior vice president for the College Board's Advanced Placement Program:

The Advanced Placement Program invites AP teachers and students to examine multiple sides of an issue — thinking critically, examining evidence, and then arguing with precision and accuracy — and this invitation extends to their views of the AP Program itself. Accordingly, AP evolves from year to year, thanks in no small part to insightful and incisive feedback from educators and youth.

So when I read a recent blog post by John Tierney, I was disappointed that he hadn't demonstrated the same critical thinking skills we see so effectively deployed by AP students, who recognize that hyperbole and overstatement should be used sparingly, that intellectually honest arguments must be grounded in evidence, and that complex issues require careful thinking.

On behalf of the tens of thousands of AP teachers and students whose classroom experiences Mr. Tierney so unilaterally condemns, I'm writing to provide some evidence intended to describe a much more diverse set of AP experiences than Mr. Tierney allows.

Mr. Tierney says AP courses don't "hold a candle" to the college course he taught. I have no data about the quality of the course he taught, so can only compare AP courses to the introductory college courses at institutions like Duke, Stanford, University of California-Berkeley, University of Texas at Austin, and Yale, which are among dozens of institutions that each recently piloted AP Exam questions among its own students to confirm comparability of content, skills and rigor. In fact, 5,000 college professors from the nation's leading colleges and universities participate annually in the review of every AP teacher's course, the writing of each AP Exam question, and the scoring of the AP Exams. These professors consistently attest to the overall quality of AP teachers' work and its comparability to the best outcomes of introductory college courses. These professors demonstrate critical thinking skills that Mr. Tierney does not, recognizing that just as there is much variability among the thousands of instructors who teach introductory courses on college campuses, there is variability among AP teachers. And these professors express a wish that there were as much support for quality across the instructors of introductory college courses, many of whom are graduate students teaching their first courses, as there is for AP teachers, let alone a consistent external examination to serve as a reliable and valid measure of learning in such course work.

After castigating AP teachers, Mr. Tierney condemns AP students as well, claiming that "two thirds" of his own AP students did not belong in his course and "dragged down the course" for students who did "belong there." Again, I will not claim visibility into his own experience with his own students, but I can say that nationally, there has been a great victory among educators who have believed that a more diverse population could indeed succeed in AP courses. In 2012, AP scores were higher than they'd been since 2004, when one million fewer students were being given access. These outcomes are a powerful testament to educators' belief that many more students were indeed ready and waiting for the sort of rigor that would prepare them for what they would encounter in college.

Despite educators having doubled the number of underrepresented minority students participating in AP over the past decade, we do share Mr. Tierney's concern that "large percentages of minority students are essentially left out." Our data show that among African American, Hispanic and Native American students with a high degree of readiness for AP, only about half of these students are participating, often because their schools do not yet offer the AP course. We call for continued commitment to expanding the availability of AP courses among prepared and motivated students of all backgrounds.

This is not at all the same as claiming that all students, here and now, should be enrolled in AP courses. These are, indeed, college-level courses. The data show this irrefutably. But just as all American students are not yet

prepared for college, all American students are not yet prepared for AP course work. We must be vigilant about fostering greater readiness for AP, and then we must care for students within AP courses by providing support, mentorship and encouragement.

This also includes investments in addressing the balance of the breadth and depth required by AP courses. We engage professors and teachers regularly in the review of AP course content, and we find that in most AP subjects, AP teachers and students have significant flexibility to tailor the AP requirements to topics and issues of deep personal interest, while developing a rich understanding of the key concepts and skills in each discipline. But in science and history, two subject areas that, by their very nature, expand the amount of possible content with every passing day and new discovery, we have recognized a need to implement a significant redesign effort that frees teachers and students from the pressure to cover superficially all possible topics. This redesign has been embraced by higher and secondary education alike as the new "gold standard" in introductory college science and history curricula.

Finally, Mr. Tierney's financial claims are inaccurate. Contrary to Mr. Tierney's statement, schools do not pay to offer AP courses. Instead, the not-for-profit College Board incurs the costs to register a school to offer AP courses and to authorize each locally developed AP syllabus, and we subsidize teacher professional development for schools unable to afford to send a teacher to one of the dozens of U.S. universities that train new AP teachers each summer. The AP Exams themselves are optional (80 percent of students opt to take them), and we cover all of our operating costs (developing, printing, shipping, scoring the exams) with the \$89 exam fee, which is less than the cost of a typical college textbook, let alone the credit hours for that college course. For students unable to afford the \$89 fee, the College Board partners with federal and state and local agencies to reduce the fee (historically to \$0-5 per exam). After paying for our expenses with the exam fees, decisions about the use of any remaining funds are decided by our Board of Trustees, which is composed of educators from colleges, universities and secondary schools. Unlike a for-profit entity, where profits privately benefit investors, the College Board is obligated to reinvest remaining funds in educational programs, specifically because it is a not-for-profit organization. The College Board Trustees ensure these funds are used to improve educational opportunity and quality for a diversity of students. This year, they have approved the use of such funds to provide, for example, scholarships to teachers; increased subsidies to low-income students; creation of online score reports for AP students; and online learning supports for students.

The AP Program is not a silver bullet. It is not a simple cure for all challenges we face within our education systems. But as educators use AP standards to help a diversity of students engage in rigorous work worth doing, I find myself inspired daily by what they are achieving.

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