Perspectives and Policies of Undergraduate Admissions Committees Regarding Advanced Placement and Honors Coursework

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ABSTRACT

THIRTY-NINE PERCENT OF ALL FIRST-TIME, FULL-time 1988 college freshmen reported having taken AP coursework while in high school, while nearly 50% reported having taken honors coursework. In response to the 8% annual growth rate of both advanced programs, 75% of the colleges surveyed have developed specific policies for recognizing and rewarding such advanced work. Twenty-five percent of the admissions committees award an extra grade point for advanced classes, while 45% accord applications with considerable AP or honors credit priority processing, and 66% give special points for such work when ranking applications. In addition, about one quarter of all colleges in the sample give either priority processing and/or special points to scholarship applicants with substantial honors or AP coursework. While admissions committees rarely differentiate between honors and AP coursework when implementing these policies, there is a widespread belief that AP courses are more rigorous and provide better preparation for college. Admissions officers tend to hold a strong preference for AP classes over honors classes, and this preference may influence the evaluative process.

INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE two major models for advanced instruction in American high schools, the traditional honors program and the College Entrance Examination Board's Advanced Placement Program. Both programs are designed to serve similar students, but they are organized differently. Advanced Placement classes are intended to provide a curriculum that prepares students for a national examination by which they may earn college credit and/or advanced standing. By contrast, honors classes provide curricula which are designed on the local level to meet special criteria as established by districts, departments, or individual teachers. Thus, curricular decision-making is significantly more centralized among Advanced Placement classes than among honors classes. Although many have examined the correlation between advanced coursework and performance in college (Casserly 1969; Edwin 1986; Gillmore 1988; Harris et. al. 1980; Ruch 1968; Willingham et. al. 1986) few have examined the influence of such coursework on the admissions process.

When the Advanced Placement Program began in the 1950s, its directors expected that eventually as many as 220 high schools might choose to participate (Harlan Hanson 1988, by personal communication). The program has obviously been more successful than was originally imagined as judged by the fact that by 1990 over 8,900 secondary schools were participating. In the ten year period between 1980 and 1990, the number of students taking AP examinations increased 175% to more than 330,000, or approximately 11.4% of all graduating seniors in the United States (College Board 1989a). Data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Study's 1988 Freshman Survey[1] revealed that 39% of all first-time, fulltime college freshmen reported they took at least one AP class in high school, while 50% took at least one honors class. At competitive institutions where the mean combined SAT score of entering freshmen exceeded 1175, 84% of all freshmen reported experience with honors while 90% reported experience with AP. To further illustrate the magnitude of the program, in 1989 the University of California at Los Angeles received more than 9,000 Advanced Placement reports from more than 3,500 students (College Board 1989). Despite the magnitude of AP and honors programs, no prior research has examined the policies, attitudes, and perspectives of admissions committees regarding such courses. By examining the influence of advanced coursework on the admission and scholarship processes, this study has helped to narrow the gap in our understanding in this area.

METHODOLOGY

TO COMPARE the relative magnitudes of AP and honors programs, we asked the Advisory Committee of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program to include relevant questions on the 1988 Student Information Form. This questionnaire was returned by more than 300,000 college freshmen from 585 colleges and universities throughout the nation and allowed us to compare the sizes of both programs. For our analysis, we elected to use only normative data, which included 222,296 freshmen at 402 institutions. All data were differentially weighted to account for disproportionate samples within certain stratification cells as well as the fact that not all students at each institution completed the questionnaire (Astin et al. 1988).

To gather data on the perspectives and policies of admissions committees, we mailed a questionnaire to the admissions deans and directors of the 200 colleges that received the greatest number of Advanced Placement Examination reports in 1988 (College Board 1988b). These institutions were selected because of their experience in dealing with applicants with such advanced coursework, and because they were the institutions most affected by such programs. The response rate was 79%.

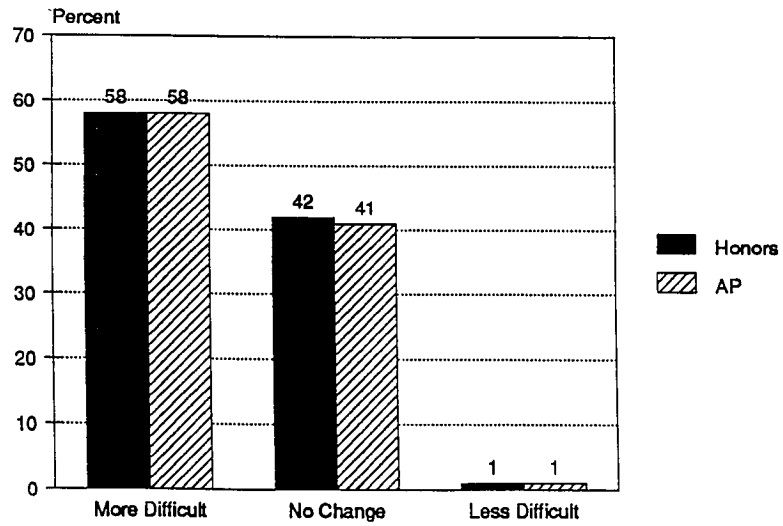
Many admissions committees use high school GPA when comparing applications for admission. As is shown in this study, however, high schools differ in the way they report grade point averages. To determine the frequency with which different policies are used, questionnaires were mailed to the principals of all 861 California high schools with graduating classes of 60 students or more. In addition, questionnaires were sent to 452 New York high schools. After a second mailing, a total of 361 administrators responded to the questionnaire. Calculations based upon information provided by the College Board (College Board 1988) showed that we received responses from approximately 51% of all schools with AP biology programs, and 52% of all schools with AP Chemistry or AP Physics programs.

ADMISSION TO COLLEGE

ADMISSIONS OFFICERS were asked to describe the importance of AP and/or honors coursework as a factor in determining acceptance of students to their institutions. The dean of admissions at a large, selective public university stated that "AP or honors courses are critical elements in admission selection." The director of admissions at a private liberal arts college said, "Our applicant pool has grown—thus we are much more selective, and AP courses or honors courses are almost necessary for admission." These kinds of comments were echoed by more than half of the respondents in the survey. Fifty-eight percent of the colleges in the sample reported that it had become progressively more difficult to be admitted without AP or honors coursework, while less than 1% said that it had become easier and 41% stated that no change had occurred (Figure 1).

To determine the importance of such courses in predicting admission and matriculation to selective institutions, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed in which the selectivity[2] of the student's college was treated as the dependent variable. Selectivity, an estimate of the average academic ability of the entering freshman class, was chosen as the dependent variable since there is a strong correlation between institutional selectivity and most measures of institutional "quality" (Astin 1962). Six independent, continuous variables were considered (combined SAT/ACT score, high school GPA, number of AP classes taken, number of honors classes taken, number of academic classes taken, and the number of colleges applied to), and were entered in the same block since it was presumed that all could bear directly upon the admissions process. The combined SAT/ACT score entered the equation first, which is understandable since institutional selectivity is defined in terms of the SAT/ACT scores of a college's freshman class. High school GPA entered second, followed by the number of colleges applied to, which increased the R^2 value to .279. The fourth entry into the equation was the number of AP classes taken, entering with a beta value of .13. According to the increase in R^2, the number of AP classes taken contributed an additional 1.5% to the explained variance. In step 6, the number of honors

Figure 1. Percent of Admissions Officers who Reported that It Had Become More Difficult or Less Difficult in Recent Years to Be Admitted to Their Institutions Without Honors or AP Credits



classes entered the equation, contributing a little less than 1% to the explained variance and having virtually no effect on the beta value for the number of AP classes. After step 6, the beta values for the AP and honors variables were .12 and .07, respectively, sufficiently above the .05 threshold to be considered as providing significant and unique information for predicting the selectivity of the institution to which a student ultimately matriculated.

In summary, these data were consistent with data collected from admissions officers and indicate that AP and honors courses provide unique information in predicting admission and matriculation to college. The more AP or honors courses, the more likely a student is to attend a selective institution, independent of GPA, SAT scores, number of academic courses taken, and number of colleges applied to.

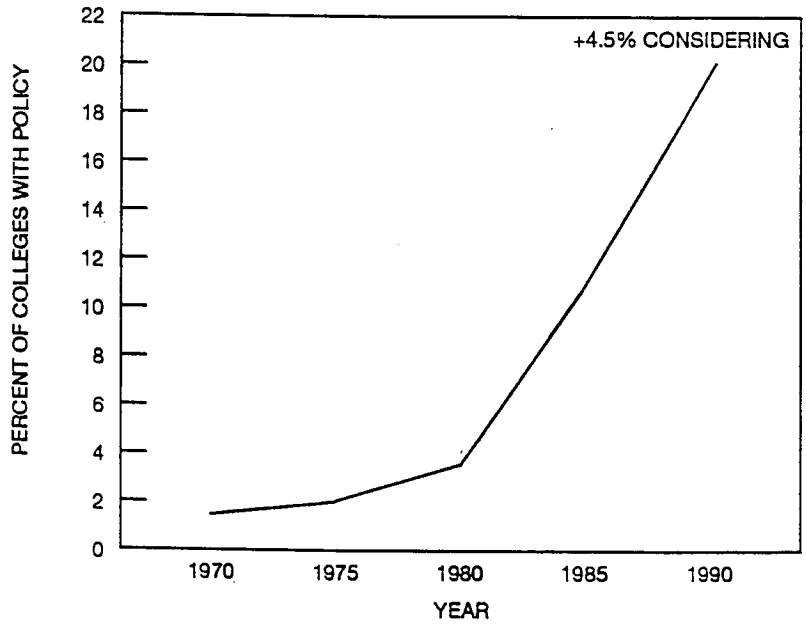
Weighted Grade Point Average

MANY COLLEGES have recently adopted a weighted GPA policy in which honors and/or AP classes are awarded an extra point. For example, the admissions committee at a college using such a scale might assign a value of 5.0 for an "A" in an advanced class and only a 4.0 for an "A" in a regular college preparatory class. Approximately 25% of the colleges surveyed have adopted such a policy or were seriously considering adopting it in the near future. The data presented in Figure 2 show that this practice has become increasingly common in recent years.

Very few of those colleges using a weighted GPA reported that they distinguish between AP and honors courses when awarding the extra grade point. There were, however, widely differing policies with respect to the number of classes for which the extra grade point could be awarded. Of those colleges which employed a weighted GPA policy, 46% limited the credit to eight or less semesters of work, while the other 54% imposed no limit. All of these colleges granted the extra grade point for work performed in the junior or senior year of high school. By contrast, only 57% granted it for honors, and 68% for AP classes taken during the sophomore year.

Of the high schools surveyed, 67% reported that they used a weighted scale for AP courses while only 59% reported the same for honors. Surprisingly, 75% of those colleges which used GPA as an admissions criteria made

Figure 2. Percent of Colleges Granting an Extra Grade Point for AP or Honors Courses When Calculating the GPA of Applicants for Admission



no attempt to standardize or recalculate grades, but rather accepted them in the form provided by the high schools. Such policies may be inequitable since some high schools report weighted GPAs while others do not. The situation is further complicated since some high schools have two or more ways of calculating GPA and allow students to select the formula that is to be used on their official transcripts. Given the variety of ways in which grades are reported, we recommend that those admissions committees that use GPAs as a criteria consider recalculating and standardizing them.

Special Consideration for Admission and Scholarships

SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT of those admissions committees in the study have a specific way of accounting for honors and AP classes in addition to, or in place of, a weighted grade point average (Table 1). Approximately 45% give some form of priority processing, such as early review, to those applications with substantial honors or AP course credit. Two thirds give special points for ranking purposes. In addition, about one quarter of all colleges in the sample provide either priority processing and/or special points to scholarship applicants with substantial honors or AP coursework.

Table 1. Special Consideration Given to Students with Substantial Advanced Placement of Honors Coursework

	*Honors**	*AP*
Priority Processing for:		
Admissions	42%	49%
Scholarships	26%	24%
Special Points:		
Admissions	64%	67%
Scholarships	26%	29%
No Special Policy	25%	28%

* Of colleges surveyed, 91% accept the honors classification given by the students' high school; 9% require that the high school furnish evidence that "honors" classes meet specific criteria.

With respect to these special considerations, few colleges differentiate between AP and honors courses (Table 1). This raises concern since additional research by the author clearly demonstrates that the curricula employed in honors courses is on the average substantially less extensive and intensive than that employed in comparable Advanced Placement courses. In general, AP courses are much more rigorous than their honors counterparts even after accounting for grade level, academic preparation, and student ability. Of those schools awarding special consideration for substantial honors coursework, only about 10% require high schools to furnish evidence that their "honors" courses meet special criteria. This also raises concern since there is much greater variation in the curricula of honors courses than AP courses. (Herr 1991a). To insure more accurate evaluation, we suggest that those admissions committees which give special consideration for "honors" coursework adopt some form of accountability similar to those policies used by the University of California (University of California 1988).

Perspectives on Honors and Advanced Placement Coursework

ALTHOUGH THE policies of most admissions committees make no distinction between AP and honors classes, the admissions officers themselves generally showed a strong preference for AP coursework. The majority (75%) believed that AP classes are more academically demanding *and* are more effective in preparing students for college-level work than are their honors counterparts, while only 2% held the opposing opinion. By an equally great margin, admissions officers perceived that the AP Program provides a higher level of quality control (Table 2). While 68% of the admissions officers in the survey believed that enrollment in AP classes is more highly correlated with high academic motivation than is enrollment in honors classes, only 5% thought the reverse. By nearly the same margin (57% to 8%), they placed greater confidence in the informational value of grades in AP classes. Although concurrent research by the author clearly shows that AP science students spend considerably less time in the laboratory than their honors counterparts, college admissions officers assumed that the AP laboratory expe-

Table 2. College Admissions Officers' Perceptions of High School AP and Honors Programs

	Honors	*AP*	*N/R*
Which classes tend to be more academically demanding?	2%	75%	23%
Which classes are more effective in preparing students for college-level work?	4%	70%	26%
Enrollment in which classes more strongly suggests high academic motivation?	5%	68%	27%
Which classes are more effective in promoting student creativity?	26%	27%	47%
Which classes offer better laboratory experiences (sciences classes only)?	8%	49%	43%
In which classes is high performance more indicative of true academic ability?	8%	57%	35%
Which classes have a higher degree of "quality control?"	3%	74%	23%
Which classes do you recommend more highly to prospective applicants?	2%	64%	34%

rience was better by a 6 to 1 margin, indicating a significant "halo effect" is associated with the AP Program.

In a separate set of questions, admissions officers were asked to state their preferences between pairs of non-equivalent AP and honors courses (Table 3). AP was preferred over equal grades in honors, and even over higher grades in college preparatory classes. What was surprising, however, was that 72% preferred a "B" in AP Biology to an "A" in honors biology, despite the fact that formal policies generally treat equivalent grades in such classes the same. In addition, the majority (73%) of admissions officers preferred students take college preparatory biology followed by AP Biology than a combination of college preparatory biology and physics. Given the widely publicized problem of serious underenrollments in high school physics, this preference comes as a surprise and most likely reflects a strong confidence in AP Program classes and not a preference for biology over physics (Pallrand and Lindenfield 1985).

Table 3. Preferences of Admissions Officers: Applicants that Admissions Officers Would Most Like to Offer to First if All Other Factors Were Identical

99%	"A" in AP chemistry	
1%	"A" in honors chemistry	
96%	"B" in AP physics	
4%	"A" in regular physics	
99%	"A" in AP biology	
1%	"B" in honors biology	
72%	"B" in AP biology	
28%	"A" in honors biology	
73%	biology, chemistry, AP biology	*equivalent grades in each*
27%	biology, chemistry, physics	

When asked to identify the program they would recommend more highly to those interested in attending their institutions, 64% of the admissions officers polled said they would recommend AP courses, while only 2% said honors courses. Although many institutions have clearly stated objective policies, it is clear that the subjective perceptions of admission officers plays a role in the decision making process. While AP and honors classes receive relatively equal treatment with respect to official policies, AP classes are clearly more favored than comparable honors classes in the subjective portion of the evaluation process, where one exists.

SUMMARY

BY 1988 approximately 39% of all first-time, fulltime college freshmen reported having taken AP coursework, while nearly 50% reported having taken honors coursework, and both programs were growing at

a rate of approximately 8% per year. In response to these expanding programs, 75% of the colleges surveyed have developed specific policies for dealing with such advanced coursework. Twenty-five percent of the admissions committees award an extra grade point for advanced classes, while 45% accord applications with considerable AP or honors credit priority processing, and 66% give special points for such work when ranking applications. In addition, about one quarter of all colleges in the sample give either priority processing and/or special points to scholarship applicants with substantial honors or AP coursework. In general, admissions committees do not differentiate between honors and AP coursework when implementing these policies.

While the official policies treat AP and honors coursework alike, it was clear that admissions officers do not believe them to be academic equivalents. Questionnaire data showed that admissions officers place significantly more confidence in the academic preparation students receive in Advanced Placement classes than parallel honors classes (Table 3). These perceptions were shared by high school teachers and administrators (Herr 1991b). Of those with opinions, 96% said they would recommend AP classes more highly to prospective applicants. Since many colleges employ subjective evaluation of applications in addition to objective criteria, it is likely that applicants can strengthen their applications by taking AP classes instead of corresponding honors classes.

One of the great strengths of AP classes, as perceived by admissions committees, is the degree of quality control associated with the program. While the AP examination helps to develop accountability, admissions committees should be aware that our data shows nearly one third of students enrolled in AP classes never take the AP exam, raising the question as to what defines a course as being "AP." In addition, only 10% of those colleges which reward honors coursework require that high schools furnish some verification that their courses are indeed of an "honors" level. What further complicates the admissions process is the fact that approximately two thirds of all high schools report "weighted" grade point averages to colleges, but only 25% of the colleges surveyed recalculate such grade point averages in an effort to standardize them. To provide for more equitable admissions processes, we recommend that colleges consider routinely recalculating student GPAs according to standard criteria. In addition, we suggest that colleges attempt to develop a form of accountability that will hold high schools responsible for demonstrating that their honors classes meet certain criteria.

FOOTNOTES

[1] For a discussion of the C.I.R.P. survey and database, please refer to Astin, A., K. Green, W. Korn, M. Schalit, and E. Berz. (1988) The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1988. Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program U.C.L.A. Higher Education Research Institute.

[2] The selectivity of an institution is an estimate of the mean combined score of entering freshmen on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. American College Test scores are converted to their SAT equivalents. The method of estimation is described in detail in Astin and Henson (1977).

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