

Administrative Policies Regarding Advanced Placement And Honors Coursework

By Norman Edward Herr

How do policies regarding honors programs compare to those dealing with Advanced Placement programs in our nation's schools? That was the focus of one study, the results of which are reported on the following pages.

American high schools offer advanced instruction using either the traditional honors model or the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) format. Curricula for honors classes are established locally, and student performance is internally evaluated; whereas AP curricula are developed nationally, and student performance is externally evaluated in a manner that provides an opportunity for college credit.

When the AP program was first offered in 1954, 500 students took the examination and 18 colleges granted advanced placement and credit to those students who performed sufficiently well. By 1980, 116,000 students were taking AP examinations nationwide, and more than 1,800 colleges were awarding credit.

In the past decade, the number of students participating in

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the program has grown by 175 percent to more than 330,000 students, and the number of colleges receiving AP grades has grown to more than 2,500. In 1990, nearly 9,000 schools participated in the AP program, representing approximately 42 percent of all high schools in the United States.

Many states have adopted initiatives to stimulate the growth of the AP programs. In 1990, Indiana became the most recent state to set aside funds to pay the special costs associated with the program. South Carolina, West Virginia, Florida, Utah, and Alabama established similar funds during the 1980s, and 15 other states are currently taking steps to encourage growth of the program.

Although there is ample documentation on the growth of the AP program and on the continued success of AP students in college (Chamberlain, 1978; Haag, 1981; Willingham and Morris, 1986; Wimmers and Morgan, 1990), virtually nothing is known about honors programs or about high school administrative policies regarding AP and honors classes. The study discussed here was designed to provide this missing information.

Magnitude of Programs

Data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Study's 1988 Freshman Survey (Astin et al., 1988), showed that 39 percent of all first-time, full-time college freshmen reported that they took at least one AP class in high school, while 50

percent took at least one honors class. At competitive institutions where the mean combined SAT score of entering freshmen exceeded 1,175, 84 percent of all freshman reported experience with honors, while 90 percent reported experience with AP. These data show that both honors and AP programs are quite popular among college-bound students, but more students have experience with honors classes than with AP classes.

The Study

To compare the relative magnitudes of AP and honors programs, the Advisory Committee of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program placed questions regarding experience with AP and honors classes 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 the sizes of both programs were compared.

For the purpose of the analysis, only normative data were used and 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 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 on information provided by the College Board showed that responses were received from approximately 27 percent of all schools and about 50 percent of those with AP programs. Questionnaires were also mailed to teachers of the advanced sciences at these schools; nearly 847 teachers responded, representing 62 percent of all schools with AP chemistry programs and 68 percent of those with AP physics and AP biology programs.

Both administrators and science teachers were questioned about school policies regarding AP programs. Administrators provided general information, while the science teachers furnished information

specific to advanced science programs. To reduce the number of contaminating variables, only the policies of schools that had experience with both AP and honors programs were compared. Of the 361 administrators who responded to the questionnaire, 240 said that their schools offered both programs. Of the 847 AP and honors science teachers who responded, 176 had experience teaching AP and honors classes to students of similar grade level and ability. Parallel analyses using the entire sample were also performed, and no differences were observed in trends, reflecting the strength of the findings.

Entrance to Program

Of the administrators in the sample, 17 percent reported that they automatically scheduled students into honors program on the basis of

Table 1
Policies Regarding Admission into AP and Honors Classes

Hon.	AP	2-tail t-test	Prob.	Policy
22%	50%	7.25	.000	Consent of teacher required
14%	6%	2.92	.004	Student must be gifted
32%	44%	2.85	.005	Open to any interested student
9%	22%	3.92	.000	Formal application
47%	53%	1.25	.212	Teacher recommendation
36%	36%	.14	.891	Counselor recommendation

Values obtained from 176 teachers who have taught AP and honors science classes to similar students. Analysis of data from entire sample bore similar results.

prior academic performance, while only 10 percent did so for AP classes. By contrast, 28 percent of all schools required formal applications for admission to AP programs, while only 19 percent did the same for honors programs. While these differences were not large, they were statistically significant, and were consistent with findings from the rest of the research.

Data obtained from teachers who had taught both AP and honors classes to similar students confirmed these findings (Table 1). A statistically greater percentage of schools (14 percent) required that honors students be classified as "gifted" than required the same of AP students (6 percent). Of these teachers, 44 percent reported that their AP program was open to any interested students, while only 32 percent reported the same for their honors courses. In addition, 22 percent required formal applications for students desiring to enter AP classes, while only 9 percent did for honors classes. Interview data confirmed these findings.

In conclusion, the data suggested that admission into AP classes relied proportionately more on motivation and performance, while admission to honors programs relied proportionately more on innate ability, administrative decision, and prior tracking.

Administrative Support

As shown in Table 2, schools that offered both AP and honors programs tended to lend greater admin-

istrative support for AP programs. The smallest difference on any preferential administrative policy question was 6 percent, while the largest was 27 percent. Significantly, all these measures showed favoritism toward the AP program over honors programs.

Of all AP classes, 24 percent received some special funding from the school or district, while only 18 percent of honors classes did. In addition, 40 percent of the surveyed schools reported that they provided funding specifically for the inservice training of AP teachers, while only 19 percent did so for honors teachers. Although policies were decidedly uneven from school to school, AP courses appeared to receive preferential treatment for funding. Very few schools, however, provided any financial or scheduling incentive for teachers of either program. While a mere 7 percent of schools offered either extra pay, an extra preparation period, or other incentive to teachers of AP programs, only 1 percent did the same for honors teachers.

In addition to providing funding, administrators may provide other types of incentives to bolster the programs they favor. For example, they may lower the minimum class size necessary to offer a particular class. The data indicated that 63 percent of all schools applied such policies to ensure that AP classes could be offered, while only 41 percent of schools did the same for honors courses. The mean class size for AP science classes was 18, while it

was 25 for comparable honors classes, perhaps reflecting a policy bias toward the AP program. Over 38 percent of all AP classes had 15 or fewer students, while only 6 percent of honors science classes did.

Campus and district administrators frequently encourage the development of the academic programs they favor. For examples, 64 percent of schools actively encouraged the development of new AP classes,

while only 48 percent did the same for honors classes. Similarly, 31 percent of schools reported that district administrators or school board officials favored the expansion of AP programs, while only 22 percent were doing the same for honors classes.

While both AP and honors programs have been expanding in recent years, the relative growth of AP program courses has been

Table 2
Comparative Policies of Schools That Offered Both AP and Honors Classes

Honors	AP	2-tail t-test	Prob.	Policy Question
18%	24%	2.36	.020	These classes receive <i>special funding</i> .
59%	67%	3.38	.001	When determining class rank, an <i>extra grade point</i> is given. (5.0 scale)
19%	40%	6.95	.000	<i>Funds</i> are provided specifically for training those who teach.
48%	64%	5.02	.000	We are actively <i>encouraging the development of new classes</i> of this type.
41%	63%	7.34	.000	A particular <i>staff member</i> oversees program.
41%	68%	8.56	.000	To ensure that we can offer such courses, we apply below average enrollment minimums.
1%	7%	3.73	.000	Teachers of such classes receive <i>extra compensation</i> (e.g., pay and preparation period)
22%	31%	4.15	.000	Our school board and/or district have been <i>pushing us to expand these programs</i> .
19%	28%	3.62	.000	Students must submit a <i>formal application</i> for admission to such classes.
17%	10%	-3.40	.001	Students in the advanced track are <i>automatically scheduled</i> into these advanced classes

(Data from administrator questionnaire; n = 240).

greater, perhaps due in part to this administrative bias. Of all schools, 63 percent reported that they designated a teacher or administrator to oversee the school's AP program, while only 41 percent of schools designated an individual to oversee honors programs. In summary, school administrators provided greater support for the expansion of AP courses than for honors courses.

Student Incentives and Rewards

To encourage students to take advanced classes, some schools offer incentives such as a weighted grading scale. In a traditional grading scale, an A is worth 4.0, a B is worth 3.0, and so forth. In a typical weighted grading scale, an A in an advanced class is given a value of 5.0, a B is given 4.0, and so forth. Of all administrators surveyed, 67

percent said that their schools used a weighted scale for AP courses, while 59 percent did the same for honors courses.

Science teachers at these schools were asked to comment on the positive and/or negative effects of this grading policy. The majority (60 percent) indicated that effects were primarily positive, while a significant minority (25 percent) felt that the policy had predominantly damaging effects. Approximately one-third of the individuals who responded said that the policy was just because it created a more accurate class ranking and thus rewarded the extra work necessary for such classes. In addition, approximately one-third mentioned that the policy was beneficial to their program because it encouraged students to take advanced classes when they otherwise might not for

Table 3
Policies Regarding the AP Examination

	All	Biology	Chemistry	Physics
All students are required to take AP examination	25%	28%	24%	20%
All students are encouraged to take AP examination	57%	56%	58%	58%
Only better students are encouraged to take AP examination	18%	16%	18%	22%
Percent of students in AP classes who take AP examination	70%	73%	70%	67%

Percentage of AP science teachers who: (a) required all students to take the exam, (b) encouraged all students to take the exam, or (c) encouraged only the better students to take it.

fear of adversely affecting their grade point average. A teacher from New Jersey expressed it in the following way: "It encourages 'rank'-oriented students to take more challenging courses. It also prevents less able students who get A's in 'Mickey Mouse' courses from placing first in the class." An additional 7 percent mentioned that the policy fostered a healthy academic competition, while 2 percent mentioned that the policy was necessary to deal with the problems of grade inflation.

While there were not as many individuals who expressed disapproval of such policies, most of those who did had very good reasons for disliking it. The main concern expressed (voiced by 23 percent of all respondents) was that the policy encouraged students to take such classes for the wrong reason. As one physics teacher said, "... It seems to encourage rank-conscious, able students to take honors classes of little interest to them, so as to gain rank. ..."

A lesser number mentioned that the weighted grading policy adversely affected competing classes. As a chemistry teacher said, "Some students won't take certain elective courses that don't carry honors credit because it will lower their grade point average. Science doesn't suffer, but the arts, business, and shop courses do."

AP Examination

Simply because a class is titled

"Advanced Placement" does not mean that everyone in the class takes the AP examination. Table 3 shows the varying school policies regarding who takes the AP examination. Approximately 24 percent of all AP science teachers surveyed said that it was a school, department, or class requirement that all students in their classes take the AP examination. Fifty-seven percent of AP science instructors stated that they recommended that all their students take the examination, while the remaining 18 percent recommended that only the better students in their classes take it.

These percentages were remarkably consistent across the science disciplines. Approximately 70 percent of all students enrolled in AP science classes took the AP examination, as shown in Table 3. In approximately 10 percent of all AP science classes, nobody took the examination. This finding raises the question as to what criteria define a class as being AP.

Conclusion

The statistics reported here suggest that honors classes more frequently resemble traditional tracking programs (based on such factors as IQ tests and prior performance) than do AP classes. AP program classes, however, appear to be based more on a meritocratic system where students who are adequately prepared and sufficiently motivated can accept the challenge and enroll. It appears as though teachers and stu-

dents have more say in terms of who gets into AP classes as opposed to who gets into honors classes.

While both programs are expanding at very significant rates, it is obvious that most administrators favor the AP program over honors programs. Compared with honors classes, AP classes are more likely to receive special funding from the school or district; they are more likely to receive an extra grade point for the determination of class rank; they are more likely to receive specific teacher-training funds; administrators are more likely to encourage their development; they are more likely to employ a coordinating staff member; they are more likely to enjoy lower than average enrollment thresholds; teachers of these classes are more likely to receive some form of extra compensation; and it is more likely that school boards and districts will actively encourage the expansion of such programs.

Finally, nearly one-third of all students from the schools in our sample apparently have AP recorded on their transcripts, but yet never take the examination, raising the

question as to what criteria actually define a class as being an AP.

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