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ON EDUCATION

Demoting Advanced Placement

By JOE BERGER

SCARSDALE, N.Y.

This town's public high school, well known for turning out some of the nation's finest college prospects, is contemplating a step that would seem to betray its competitive reputation: eliminating Advanced Placement courses.

Scarsdale High School is a place where 70 percent of the 1,500 students take an A.P. course, and many take five and six to impress college admissions officers with their willingness to challenge themselves. But like a few private schools, Scarsdale is concluding that the A.P. pile-on is helping turn the teenage years into a rat race where learning becomes a calculated means to an end rather than a chance for in-depth investigation, imagination, even some fun to go along with all that amassing of knowledge.

"People nationwide are recognizing what an inhuman obstacle course college admission is, and a big element of that is A.P.," said Bruce Hammond, director of college counseling at Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque, which dropped A.P. courses a few years ago.

Across the country, students in, say, A.P. American history who might better understand the Depression by taking time to read "Grapes of Wrath" are instead huffing and puffing through chronological parades of facts and documents.

Mastering that material will give them a better chance to score the all-important 5 on the [College Board's](#) A.P. tests, which would help land them in an elite college and perhaps relieve them of some survey courses. But in that frantic atmosphere, little learning takes place for the zest of it, critics of the A.P. program say.

"The test unfortunately drives what you teach and how you teach," said Kelley Hamm, Scarsdale's assistant principal.

The A.P. exercise can seem especially nonsensical in the second senior semester, particularly in places like Scarsdale where half the students are admitted to college by Christmas through early decision. Scores on the A.P. test arrive in mid-summer, too late to affect a final course grade. Getting a 5 won't even trim tuition bills because few colleges allow students to use A.P. credits to drop a semester.

The high school years have been distorted enough by the frenzied rounds of college visits, applications and S.A.T. cram courses. At an evening forum last week to acquaint Scarsdale parents with the faculty proposal, critics of A.P. courses asked: Is our mission to steal a head start on college? Or should we be cultivating habits of mind like tolerance of ambiguity, persistence in the face of setbacks, the ability to work with others on complex

problems?

Nevertheless, questions from parents signaled some considerable anxiety about dropping a program that has reliably gotten Scarsdale students into top colleges.

A.P. classes were first given in the mid-1950's as a way for ambitious students to take college-level work. But like cellphones, latte and other once-elite products, they have become ubiquitous. More than 1.76 million students now take them, and they have become a litmus test for school and student quality.

A.P. courses have certainly enhanced lackluster schools, causing bright students to reach higher and allowing elite colleges to find diamonds in the rough of mediocre classrooms.

Even in Scarsdale, administrators say that math teachers like A.P. calculus and feel it offers in-depth flexibility. But too often in English, science and history, teachers and students have found that improvisation, whimsy, the leisure to wrestle with knotty problems get squeezed out in the rush to swallow information.

Andrew Meyers, history chairman at the Fieldston School in the Bronx, which discarded A.P. courses five years ago, recalled an A.P. class he tried to cut short.

"I remember we had this great conversation about Reconstruction and I said 'I'm sorry, we have to go on to women's suffrage.' The students looked at me and said: 'But we're Fieldston. We're supposed to have the opportunity to have this kind of conversation.' "

Some Scarsdale parents are rightfully nervous. Just as consumers are accustomed to noshing potato chips out of a bag not a jar, colleges like to see applicants come packed in A.P. courses.

"A.P. is a benchmark," said one parent, Lorinda Chiang, adding "the one who is going to get hurt is my daughter." Another Scarsdale mother, interviewed on condition that her name be withheld, said she worried that teachers would replace A.P. courses with parochial topics.

"If my child only learned about one Chinese dynasty and didn't learn any European history, then that's a problem," she said. "I want to raise well-rounded children."

These concerns are worth heeding. Fieldston tried to make new courses as rigorous and quite sweeping. A.P. European history became European Intellectual History. Students lost some of the "march to the sea" comprehensiveness of a survey course, but spent more time wrestling with the ideas of Luther, Montesquieu, Marx and Freud.

College Board officials say their tests do not force teachers to ram down information. Trevor Packer, executive director of the College Board's A.P. program, said students need only answer only a quarter of questions right in the multiple-choice section to earn a 5 score, leaving lots of room for inventiveness elsewhere. Much of the test has questions based on documents and demands analysis rather than memorization.

"If you would survey all 12,000 A.P. U.S. History teachers, you would find maybe 100 of them who understand the scoring of exams," he said, acknowledging that the College Board needs to do a better job explaining.

After scuttling A.P., Fieldston found that its students were still getting admitted to top colleges. Scarsdale probably faces little risk as well. Admissions officers know the school well and know that the “accelerated” classes that would replace A.P. under the faculty proposal, which would need the informal blessings of the Scarsdale school board, will be as demanding, said Scarsdale’s principal, John Klemme.

Just to be safe, 100 colleges were informed of what Scarsdale is proposing, and 98 said there would be no problem.

Schools without Scarsdale’s reputation may find it harder to convince admissions officers that they offer challenging courses unless those courses carry the A.P. seal of approval.

Perhaps an experimental interlude may be needed so that colleges get accustomed to more painstakingly scrutinizing tough courses that do not carry the A.P. label. And perhaps, most schools, even Scarsdale, should offer some A.P. courses to allow those students who want to start taking electives in history or science as soon as they reach campus to do so. What shouldn’t happen is a bulking up on A.P. courses merely to impress admission officers.

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