PACE

COMMENTARY

Hispanic Student Performance on Advanced Placement Exams

Cause for Concern

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Accelerated learning options such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses are represented as exemplars of challenging curricula that prepare students for collegiate coursework. Although gaps exist in the participation rates of ethnic minority students in accelerated learning options, few researchers have compared the performance of underrepresented student groups in these programs from one state to another.

In this study, we compared the performance of Hispanic students from California, Texas, and Arizona on the two Advanced Placement English exams (i.e., AP English Language and Composition and AP English Literature and Composition) using archival data from the College Board from 1997 through 2012. We obtained statistically significant differences in all 16 comparisons for the English Language and Composition exam and in 15 of the 16 comparisons for the English Literature and Composition exam. Students from Arizona had the highest passing rate in 21 comparisons, California had the highest passing rate in 11 comparisons, and Texas had the lowest passing rate in all 32 comparisons. Of importance is that the majority of Hispanic students who took an AP English exam failed to earn a score that would result in college credit or advanced placement. Although we documented dramatic increases in the number of Hispanic students who took AP English exams during this 16-year period, overall scores declined during this same time. The majority of Hispanic students whose test scores we analyzed would not have graduated from college in less time or saved money on college tuition by earning credit for coursework based on their AP exam scores.

In 2011, the College Board urged educators and policymakers to examine the success of students taking AP exams. Specifically, the College Board stated, "True equity is not achieved until the demographics of both AP classrooms and of the successful AP student population mirror the demographics of the nation." The College Board devised a formula for calculating equity and excellence in which the percent of a particular ethnicity represented in a graduating class is divided by the percent of students of that ethnicity within the graduating class who scored a 3 or better on at least one AP exam. None of the three states we examined met the College Board's definition of equity and excellence for Hispanic students.

The mission to provide access to AP for all students is an admirable one. However, individual students present with varying degrees of readiness. Placing students who are not college ready in AP courses is problematic and represents a missed opportunity for the students to develop prerequisite skills. Simply stated, if a student does not have prerequisite skills to succeed in college-level coursework, then placement in a rigorous college preparatory course may be beneficial for students in developing fundamental academic and non-cognitive readiness skills. Therefore, educators should examine prerequisite curriculum to

determine if proper alignment exists to develop skills and knowledge necessary for student success in rigorous placements.

A student who is college ready is adequately prepared to be successful in college coursework, and AP courses are appropriate for all high school students who are college ready. Perhaps, the federal government's reduction of funding for advanced academic programs by $26 million will provide an opportunity to consider other options for increasing college readiness of students. In reality, without greater focus on developing prerequisite skills and the provision of additional supports to improve the success rates of students, increasing participation in AP programs represents a waste of financial resources and missed opportunity to prepare students for college and beyond.

The full study can be found in Koch, B., Slate, J. R., & Moore, G. W. (2014). Advanced Placement English exam scores: A comparison of scores for Hispanic students from California, Texas, and Arizona. Education and Urban Society, forthcoming.

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