

Equity and Access for Minority Students in AP Courses

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Gaps in achievement among low-income, minority, and English-language learners were brought to the attention of educators and the public with the passage of No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001. Since then the federal government has held school districts accountable for the achievement of all students with special emphasis on those groups of students who have typically underperformed. In addition to gaps in student achievement with regards to state testing measures, there has also been a noticeable gap in the representation of minority students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The purpose of this article is to consider race as it relates to enrollment numbers in Advanced Placement courses and highlight strategies that school divisions have found to be effective in increasing minority enrollment through the lens of the Social Cognitive Theory. Low minority enrollment in advanced placement courses has been a point of contention for decades. Enrollment that does not reflect school populations across America is indicative of a bigger picture surrounding educational inequalities (Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008).

History of Advanced Placement Courses

Advanced Placement (AP) courses were started by a consortium of private schools in the 1950s to offer smart and ambitious high school students a head start on college after seeing a drop in enrollment at Ivy League universities (Wakelyn, 2009). According to collegeboard.com, by the 1955-56 school year, the College Board was invited to step in and take over administration of the program and it was named the College Board Advanced Placement Program.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the College Board and its many schools reached out to include minority and low-income students in AP classes. Over the years, the College Board has expanded access to AP by introducing Pre-AP® Initiatives to help students gain important knowledge and skills, beginning in middle school,

by coordinating curriculum and instruction from one grade to the next so that students are ready to take on advanced studies in high school (College Board, 2003).

The program has developed over the years offering more than thirty courses across multiple subject areas. These courses are aligned with knowledge and assignments typically found in corresponding introductory college courses providing a rigorous curriculum and assessment by which all students can be compared. AP is the oldest and largest program offering college-type experiences for high school students. Theokas and Saaris (2013) suggested that it is also a potentially powerful means of disrupting the high-end achievement gap.

The Advanced Placement Program and African American Students

The College Board (2006) reported that the graduating class of 2005 had 609,807 students that took the AP exam with a total of 1,550,475 exams taken. 14.1% scored 3 or above (5 being the top score). The nation's average exam score was 2.88. Although African Americans make up 13.4% of the nation's population, only 6.4% of African Americans took AP exams. Their mean score was 1.99 (College Board, 2006). Snapshot data of North Carolina, revealed that while 29% of the state's population was African American, only 11% took AP exams during the 2004-05 school year (North Carolina Department of Education, 2005).

TABLE 1.
2004 – 2005 School enrollments

	White	African American
Students in North Carolina High Schools 2005	57%	29%
Percentage of students enrolled in AP classes 2005	78%	11%
Students that took AP exams 2000	82.1%	8.7%
Students that passed the exams 2000	48%	26.5%

Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2005)
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2001)

A look at similar data eight years later clearly show that the opportunity gap still exists. 14.5% of the 2013 United States graduating class was African

American and only 9.2 % of that number were AP exam takers (College Board, 2013).

The Gap in Achievement

According to the 10th Annual Report to the Nation by the College Board (2014), the gap between minority and majority enrollment in AP courses is narrowing, but there is still much work to be done. Students who graduate from high school having taken rigorous AP courses has nearly doubled in the past ten years while the number of low-income students taking AP courses has more than quadrupled. A little more than 33% of public high school graduates in the class of 2013 took an AP exam compared to just under 19% in 2003 and 27.5% of them were low-income in 2013 compared to 11.4% in 2003.

While this increase is encouraging we also learned from the AP Report to the Nation that nearly 300,000 academically prepared students in this country either did not take a course in an available AP subject for which they had potential, or attended a school that did not offer the course (College Board, 2014). Understanding and closing this gap has been one of the most pressing issues of the College Board prompting the implementation of their newest initiative called the “All In” Campaign. The premise of this campaign is to ensure 100% of underserved students who have demonstrated potential to succeed in AP take at least one AP course. They have charged all schools to participate.

The obvious question one may ask about such a campaign is why should students take AP courses? What is the benefit of students taking an AP course? According to a 2009 ACT survey, many US high school graduates are finishing school not prepared to enter postsecondary education or even perform career-ready level tasks in the core subject areas (NASSP, 2010). We also know from the Center for Public Education report in 2012 that the demand for workers with a college education is growing faster than the supply of graduates (p. 2). National organizations, policymakers, and school leaders see this weakness and because AP has proven to be a standardized, rigorous curriculum of introductory college-level work, encouraging students who are academically prepared to

challenge themselves with these courses is a good way to increase preparation for post-secondary education.

Hallet and Venegas (2011) state that the level of rigor that high school students experience, including involvement in AP courses, is directly correlated to the success students have in college. However, not all students enter high school prepared to take on this challenge. It is recognized that proper steps must be taken well before a student enters ninth grade to be sure he/she can take on the challenge of AP. Strengthening the rigor of middle school and even elementary school courses will help build students’ skills so all will be better equipped to handle the most rigorous curriculum in high school. Abdul-Alim (2013) refers to this as back-mapping; preparing elementary students for higher level thinking and eventually college coursework.

Another clear benefit to AP courses is the standard national AP exam that is taken at the end of the course by most students. Depending on the score earned on this exam and the university in which a student enrolls, college credit may be earned. There is a strong correlation between passing AP exams and having academic success in college (College Board, 2014; Wakelyn, 2009). Higher grade point averages and graduation rates in college are two correlations made when students earn passing grades on AP exams in high school (Hallet & Venegas, 2011).

Equity in AP Course Offerings

Promoting equity and excellence in education is the cornerstone of the College Board’s mission (College Board, 2014). In many school divisions there are currently two major issues surrounding equity and access of AP courses: the offering of AP courses in urban and rural schools and access to take advantage of the opportunity in schools that have an existing program. Schools serving low-income students (which also happen to be high minority populations in most cases) offer significantly fewer AP courses than more affluent communities (Zarate & Pachon, 2006).

The increased equity in course offerings also calls for the need of equity in course quality. If

equity is the desired outcome, we must ensure that students have similar opportunities to participate in courses with rigorous teaching methodologies and not simply increase the number of AP courses on their transcripts (Hallet & Venegas, 2011). Schools are cautioned that not giving minority students the same quality of instruction will place them at a distinct disadvantage when taking AP exams and participating in college courses once admitted because the students will be expected to have a foundation of knowledge based on their AP coursework (Hallet & Venegas, 2011). Furthermore, Zarate and Pachon (2006) report that if AP courses continue to be an important aspect of the college admissions process and if students of color do not have equitable access to this experience, their access to equitable post-secondary educational opportunities could also be compromised.

Access to AP Courses

Another issue surrounding minority participation in AP courses is the fact that many schools have multiple barriers in place preventing students who have traditionally been underserved from having access to the courses. While the College Board (2014) reports that the overall expansion of AP has nearly doubled, they also report that Black students were the most underrepresented group in both AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP exam takers. Factors such as grade point average (GPA) and teacher recommendations keep these students from having the same opportunities as other students yet indicators have not shown predicted success (College Board, 2014; Abdul-Alim, 2013).

According to Theokas and Saaris (2013) educators often assume that minority students are not prepared for the rigor of AP coursework. This is not an assumption that holds true in all cases. In fact, Theokas and Saaris reported that based on PSAT scores, more Black and Latino students with demonstrated potential to succeed in AP courses were not enrolled. Rather than assume preparation is the issue, we must understand what barriers and challenges are keeping us from enrolling minority students in programs. Klepfer and Hull (2012) report that even students with the lowest academic achievement in their sophomore year benefit from

AP courses and show higher gains than high academic achieving students.

Along with this barrier to AP courses is the concern that if minority students are included in the courses the curriculum may become watered down to meet their level of rigor. As Hallet and Venegas (2011) state if equity is the desired outcome, we must ensure that students have similar opportunities to participate in courses with rigorous teaching methodologies and not simply increase the number of AP courses on their transcripts. Simply calling a course AP will not provide the benefits that the program was intended to give students. According to a study by Horn, Kojaku, and Carroll (2001) they found that the level of rigor that high school students experience, including involvement in AP courses, is directly correlated to the success students have in college. Therefore it is vital that schools offering AP courses implement them with great fidelity. If minority students are not provided the rigor of a true AP course, they will be at a distinct disadvantage entering college. Not only will there be an expectation that they have foundational knowledge, but it will be assumed they have been able to think critically, analyze information, and write sufficiently (Hallet & Venegas, 2011). Strategies must be used to help students who are lagging behind catch up so they may be successful.

Social Cognitive Theory

The theoretical framework through which we will examine effective strategies to increase minority enrollment in AP classes is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SCT refers to a psychological model of behavior that emerged primarily from the work of Albert Bandura (1977; 1986). SCT emphasizes that much of what is learned in a social context is done through observation. There are three assumptions surrounding the Social Cognitive Theory:

- the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another
- people have an ability to influence their own behavior and the environment in a purposeful, goal-directed fashion (Bandura 2001)
- learning can occur without an immediate change in behavior

As mentioned earlier, one core premise within SCT has been that people learn through observation. As people watch behavior and consequences of models in the environment they learn how to create their own roles. Outcome expectations are important within SCT as well. Outcome expectations shape the decisions people make about what actions to take and which behaviors to suppress (Denler, et. al., 2014). Perceived self-efficacy is a very influential concept within SCT. Self-efficacy reflects individuals' beliefs about whether they can achieve a given level of success at a particular task (Bandura, 1997). Higher levels of perceived self-efficacy have been associated with greater choice, persistence, and with more effective strategy use (Pajares, 1996). Goal setting within SCT reflects cognitive representations of anticipated, desired, or preferred outcomes. People who can set goals can envision the future, identify what it is they wish to achieve, and create plans of action. People who can set goals can naturally self-regulate. Self-regulation is viewed by SCT in three sub-processes (Bandura, 1986; 1991).

- Self-observation - students' ability to monitor or keep track of their own behaviors and outcomes;
- Self-judgment - students' evaluate whether their actions are effective and allow them to make progress toward their goals;
- Self-reaction - students' response to the evaluations they have made by modifying their behavior, rewarding it, or continuing it.

Numerous research studies exist that examine the role of teacher involvement on the academic achievement of students (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). When students feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to feel a sense of connection to school and are more likely to be academically successful and therefore have a stronger self-efficacy. If teachers have high expectations students are more likely to succeed. Likewise, if teachers have low expectations, students have less motivation to succeed (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Teachers often have lower expectations for African American students (Garibaldi, 1992). Low expectations by teachers help to explain why so many African Americans are

low achievers and contribute to their low enrollment in advanced placement courses. Teacher involvement is critical for African American students (Tucker, et. al. 2002, 2005). Student self-efficacy is influenced by teachers and African American students need positive teacher/student relationships to help them feel as though they belong, particularly in the AP classroom (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2007).

The Scholar Identity Model proposes a type of support for African American students that focuses on changing, specifically Black males' self-perception, self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity in academic-oriented settings (Whiting, 2009). Due to the academic and social challenges that confront Black males in classrooms, Whiting sees a clear need for programmed or systematic interventions on the part of educators. While this model proposes to be male gender specific, the root of the concept would benefit both genders. Scholar Identity is defined as one in which Black males perceive themselves as academicians, as studious, and as intelligent or talented in school settings (Whiting, 2009). If educators could be more deliberate about nurturing the scholar identity of African American students beginning at a younger age, they will reach a higher potential in school and life. Strong role models are necessary, as mentioned in the tenants of the SCT; as people watch behavior and consequences of models in the environment they learn how to create their own roles.

The Scholar Identity Model and Social Cognitive Theory have their foundations resting on the role of self-efficacy. According to Whiting (2009), young men with a scholar identity are resilient, have high self-confidence, high self-control, strong sense of self-responsibility and a clear understanding of the tasks they face. They believe that they can accomplish all the subtasks associated with their goal. They believe that they are strong students and elect to reject stereotypes imposed on them because they deem themselves to be intelligent and talented. They are optimistic and seek out challenges. Both theories discuss the importance of role models to help empower the aforementioned qualities described. Seeking out

and retaining qualified Black males as leaders and teachers in schools is critical to supporting the Scholar Identity Model.

Strategies to Increase Minority Enrollment in AP

A growing body of work has unveiled promising policies and practices that promote equity and excellence in increased rigor at the high school level (NASSP, 2010). Both policymakers and school leaders have taken the advice of organizations to increase access to AP courses for all students, particularly minorities, as well as promote equity within those courses by using creative strategies and providing resources to support those strategies. We will highlight some of the most effective strategies found in the research that support increased access for minority students.

Student Advocacy. At East High School in Denver, Colorado the entire school has embraced the issue of low minority representation in AP and ways to increase it. After a student led group reported their findings to the media in 2001, the school decided to work on different strategies to help AP enrollment reflect the population of the student body (Walker, 2002). After more than a decade of work, a follow up report by Gottlieb (2014) shows some progress. The principal said his school has moved from complacency to a school-wide fixation of tackling head on the issue of enrollment of minorities in AP courses (Gottlieb, 2014).

Gottlieb (2014) also reports that in order to prepare students for more rigorous coursework the school has launched 'detracking' efforts. This idea mixes both honors and regular track students within a class. The formula that they attempt to follow for this is a 60-40 mix of higher achieving to lower achieving. They also strive to keep class size small for optimal success. In addition, the school has become very strategic in raising awareness among minority students and their parents about availability of classes. Rather than simply advertise the courses, they looked at a group of minorities who scored proficient or higher on the standardized test in reading and had a GPA of 3.0 or higher but were not taking honors courses. Those students were invited to meetings where the student

advocacy group, Angels for AP excellence, talked with them. Students were also given an opportunity to shadow AP students to see what the courses were like. This particular strategy is helpful in applying SCT as students can learn by observation.

This school also targeted ninth and tenth graders from the previous school year who were partially proficient on the state test by reaching out to them and their families to explain benefits of higher level courses and offer information on college admissions. Finally, the school has initiated a school-based funding program to help pay the cost of the AP exam for those students who cannot afford it (Gottlieb, 2014; College Board, 2013).

Professional Development. As reported in the 2013 Challenge Success article about the AP program, a Texas initiative program was founded whereby students received extra tutoring and teachers received professional development to help improve the quality of their program. In addition, they implemented changes in earlier grades' curriculum to help prepare high school students for college-level work. Their work has since been replicated in other states, including Virginia, through the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI). The strategies implemented in Texas were effective in increasing the strength of their AP program overall, but did not report whether the program had direct results on the increase of minority participation.

Professional development for teachers is also imperative to assist in increasing minority participation in AP (College Board, 2013, Wakelyn, 2011). According to their website, the College Board suggests teachers of AP courses receive direct training related to delivering their content as well as understanding the standard levels of performance on the national AP exam. Through professional development, teachers can also gain a deeper awareness of multiple forms of intelligence and learn to distinguish between behaviors and academic ability.

As in the Denver school, professional development does not end with the teachers. Counselors and administrators will benefit from training as well (Walker, 2002). This training may cover ways to reach minority families

about the benefits of more rigorous courses or how to use the AP Potential report that predicts success in AP courses based on PSAT scores. As reported in Gottlieb's 2014 article, increasing minority participation is a school culture and attitude change. It needs to involve all stakeholders.

Open Enrollment. Open enrollment is yet another strategy cited in research that schools are using to increase minority enrollment in AP courses (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). We have learned through research, however, that students of color do not always feel welcomed in AP courses and fear being socially isolated (Gottlieb, 2014; Wakelyn, 2009). Because of this, schools must be sensitive and encourage minority participation in groups (Wakelyn, 2009). In his report, *Raising Rigor, Getting Results* (2009), Wakelyn offers an example of what school in Georgia are doing to recruit minorities. They asked current AP students who were also athletes and cheerleaders to recruit new AP candidates from their social circles while the administrators also contacted students and their parents to encourage enrollment. This strategy also supports SCT because students learn best when there are others with whom they relate in the class, especially peers.

Recommendations

It is important to note that in the literature, the majority of the authors acknowledge that in order to increase minority involvement in AP courses, there are multiple facets to be considered. None of the recommendations work in isolation and not all work for every school, but they all seem to agree on the fact that the culture of the school must change. This is a slightly different way of thinking among administrators, teachers, counselors, and most importantly, students of color.

Solórzano and Ornelas (2002) recommend that K-12 institutions develop a college-going culture that includes, at minimum, the following six conditions to help remedy the equity and access of AP classes for minority students. They are:

1. A school culture supportive of advanced study and college going.
2. Student participation in rigorous academic courses.

3. Student access to qualified teachers.
4. Student access to intensive academic supports.
5. The school developing a multicultural college-going identity.
6. The school's connections with parents and community around advanced study.

While most would agree that these seem basic and obvious measures, they are not easy to achieve and will take time to realize. Schools must be honest about what barriers to AP are currently in place and what message is being conveyed to minority students about the availability of those courses to them (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

Challenge Success (2013) also supports efforts such as these. They support a rigorous curriculum, with support to both teachers and students, cautioning that professional development, while vital to an AP program, will also be costly. They also encourage educating families about AP courses and establishing an open enrollment policy for all students who have an interest in taking them, not just top-tier students.

Implications of Increasing Minority Access to AP

Implementing an open enrollment policy for AP courses will have some direct and indirect consequences. Naturally by eliminating any gatekeeping, enrollment should increase, but it is vital that schools take precautions as to not use tokenism as a means of increasing minority enrollment (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Schools need to be strategic in reaching out to those traditionally underrepresented groups to help bolster their participation and target groups of students who are prepared to take on the challenge. Removing the barriers is not sufficient. Low SES students and minority students often come with academic and social deficits requiring support mechanisms to help them navigate the challenges of rigorous courses and gain access to the same opportunities (NASSP, 2010).

Schools should also consider that with increased enrollment and exam takers will come a possible decrease in AP exam scores. While this should be monitored, research tells us that simply

taking an AP course reaps benefits that would not be otherwise realized in an average class (Klepfer and Hull, 2012). However, if the majority of students cannot earn a passing score, it is possible that the curriculum is being compromised and therefore must be corrected (Challenge Success, 2013).

Conclusion

Opportunities to participate in advanced placement courses can go a long way toward better preparing students for college and beyond. The data clearly show that opportunity gaps exist in many places, between schools, types of programs offered, and within schools. There are many examples of schools systems nationwide who are implementing successful programs that are working to lessen the opportunity gap. Such actions are proof that there is hope of lessening the gap. Until more school systems make changes, many students will continue to be less prepared for higher education and for some challenges found in today's workplaces, and disproportionately, those students will be students of color (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). Finally, although there are many strategies that are proven successful for increasing minority enrollment in AP courses, more research is needed to determine how to support their academic and emotional needs in the program.

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