



July 18, 2007

College Board Tries to Police Use of 'Advanced Placement' Label

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

When Bruce Poch, the dean of admissions at Pomona College, sees a high school transcript listing courses in AP Philosophy or AP Middle Eastern History, he knows something is wrong. There is no such thing. Neither subject is among the 37 in the [College Board](#)'s Advanced Placement program.

“Schools just slap AP on courses to tag them as high-level, even when there’s no Advanced Placement exam in the subject,” Mr. Poch said. “It was getting to be like Kleenex or Xerox.”

But now, for the first time, the College Board is creating a list of classes each school is authorized to call AP and reviewing the syllabuses for those classes. The list, expected in November, is both an effort to protect the College Board brand and an attempt to ensure that Advanced Placement classes cover what college freshmen learn, so colleges can safely award credit to students who do well on AP exams.

“We’ve heard of schools that offered AP Botany, AP Astronomy, AP Ceramics, and one Wyoming school with AP Military History,” said Trevor Packer, director of the board’s Advanced Placement program. “We don’t have those subjects. One of the reasons colleges called for the audit was that they wanted to know better what it means when they see an AP on a transcript.”

Schools seeking approval for their Advanced Placement courses must submit their syllabuses. Those found lacking are returned, but schools have two more chances to revise them.

Developed 50 years ago for gifted students in elite high schools, the Advanced Placement program now exists in almost two-thirds of American high schools. In May, about 1.5 million students took 2.5 million Advanced Placement exams, hoping to earn college credit and impress college admissions offices, which often give applicants extra points on the transcript.

But with so many more APs — real and fake — admissions officers have difficulty assessing them, especially since admission decisions are made before the May exams.

“When you look at transcripts, what you see is often not what you get,” said William Fitzsimmons,

[Harvard](#)'s dean of admissions. "It could be AP Powerlifting next, who knows? In my view, it's misleading to call something AP if it's not a College Board AP. And even in legitimate College Board AP courses, it's hard to know what was taught until one sees the exam results. If students are getting watered-down AP courses, this audit will help bring them up to the standard."

As APs have spread, it has become clear that the name is no guarantee of rigor; an AP course at a wealthy suburban high school may be far more ambitious than one at a poor rural school. And in many struggling high schools, nearly all the students in Advanced Placement classes fail the exam.

The College Board concedes that the audit will do nothing to change that. "By no means do we anticipate that this will result in higher exam scores," Mr. Packer said. "The audit allows us to know one thing only, and that is, does the AP teacher know what elements are expected in a college-level course. It's not proof that students are prepared for college-level work." But, he said, the audit allows the board to give teachers more guidance and practice materials, and to pinpoint areas where APs do not mirror college courses.

In AP Art History courses, the audit found, the most common flaw in the syllabuses was a narrow focus on Western art. In physics, atomic and nuclear physics were often left out. In psychology, statistical analysis and measurement needed bolstering. And in government and politics, many high schools left out Iran and Islam.

The exams given each May, for \$83 apiece, are graded on a scale of 1 to 5, with scores of 3 and up considered passing. But some colleges grant credit only for a 4 or a 5.

The College Board considered publishing each school's proportion of passing students, Mr. Packer said, but feared that would push schools to restrict their APs to top students — the opposite of the open-door policy the College Board supports.

The Advanced Placement program is an odd hybrid of exam and coursework. Any student can take any exam, without taking an AP class. And some high schools have dropped AP classes, safe in knowing their students will still do well on AP exams.

Conversely, students who take AP classes need not take the AP exam. Some skip the exams because they know they will fail; others never planned to take the exam, enrolling in the class mostly to look good in the college admissions process.

Given the growth of the program, and the wide variance in how it is used, many college officials say the audit will be useful.

"I think there is legitimacy in what the College Board is trying to do with this audit, which is to make sure there's integrity to this program, since it's been democratized and is becoming almost a de facto national curriculum," said Mr. Poch of Pomona.

Many high school administrators agree.

“I think the College Board was wise in trying to get some quality control, even though it’s a lot of work and made the teachers very unhappy,” said Kathleen Baylog, the Advanced Placement coordinator at Lakewood High School in Ohio.

So far, teachers have submitted more than 17,000 syllabuses, 80 percent of them approved on the initial review, and 98 percent after being revised and resubmitted. No one, the College Board said, has yet submitted syllabuses three times and been rejected. But there have been logistic glitches. With 850 professors assessing syllabuses, responses may be inconsistent.

“In AP literature, three of our teachers submitted the same syllabus, and one got a quick O.K., one came back saying we needed changes, and one we didn’t get back yet,” said Mark Porto, principal of Hackensack High School in New Jersey. Some find such inconsistencies troubling, from an organization that purports to grade AP exams and SAT essays consistently.

At Montclair High School in New Jersey, Anthony Orso was told that his physics syllabus did not include enough labs, although it had more than twice the number required.

“It’s a little frustrating,” he said. “But the real issue is that this is just an exercise in producing a syllabus, with no way of knowing that what’s on paper is what’s being taught in the classroom.”

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)

- [Automobiles](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

- [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [Search](#)
- [Corrections](#)
 - [RSS](#)
- [First Look](#)
 - [Help](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Work for Us](#)
- [Site Map](#)