

A Brief History of the Advanced Placement Program®

From modest beginnings at the midpoint of the twentieth century, the Advanced Placement Program® (AP®) has grown to be the premier program advancing educational excellence in secondary schools across the United States. AP courses offer rigorous college-level curricula and assessments to students in high school. The program sets the standard for academic achievement in 34 courses and offers extensive teacher professional development. An AP Italian Language and Culture course will be added in 2005. This year, more than one million students took over 1.74 million end-of-course AP Exams.

A Pilot Program Is Born

In the early part of the twentieth century, the gap between secondary and higher education widened. Following World War II, many Americans realized that this trend had to be reversed. Responding to the need for a better-educated populace, the Ford Foundation created the Fund for the Advancement of Education. In two studies supported by the fund, educators recommended that secondary schools and colleges work together to avoid repetition in course work at the high school and college levels and to allow motivated students to work at the height of their capabilities and advance as quickly as possible.

One study, conducted by educators from three elite prep schools—Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville—and three of the country's most prestigious colleges—Harvard, Princeton, and Yale—urged schools and colleges to see themselves as “two halves of a common enterprise.” The report recommended that secondary schools recruit imaginative teachers, that they encourage high school seniors to engage in independent study and college-level work, and that achievement exams be used to allow students to enter college with advanced standing.

A second study by the Committee on Admission with Advanced Standing formulated a plan for developing college-level curricula and standards that could be instituted at the high school level. The Committee on Admission then recruited leaders in every discipline from the ranks of higher education to develop high school course descriptions and assessments that colleges would find rigorous enough to use as a basis for granting credit. In 1952, a pilot program was launched introducing advanced courses in 11 initial subjects. By the 1955-56 school year, the program was under way and the College Board was invited to step in and take over administration of the program, named the College Board Advanced Placement Program.

Expanding Efforts

During the 1960s, the College Board began a long-term commitment to teacher training. Secondary school teachers reported that AP courses were revitalizing their careers. During the 1970s and 1980s, increasing numbers of schools added AP to their advanced academic offerings. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the College Board and 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 and AP Vertical Teams® 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.

In 2003, AP continues to strive for, and meet, the goal of excellence in education. A recent assessment by Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that AP students who received grades of 3, 4, or 5 on AP Examinations in Physics and Calculus outperformed other physics and advanced math students from both the United States and abroad. A study published by the U.S. Department of Education, *Answers in the Toolbox*, shows that the most powerful predictor of college graduation is the rigor of a student's high school curriculum. State and federal support for AP testifies to the program's reputation as the gold standard in American education. Outside the United States, AP courses and exam grades are used in the admissions process in nearly 300 universities. Additional information about the AP Program can be found on AP Central™ at apcentral.collegeboard.com.