

HAVING THE

AP
CONVERSATION

by Roger Weaver

If you now offer Advanced Placement courses, reconsidering the value and appropriateness of the AP curriculum to your school is a useful and productive exercise, regardless of the outcome.

In my forty odd years in independent education, I have lost count of the conversations I have had with other school heads that begin with some version of the following: “I’m not sure the AP is the best choice for us, but in my school community there is really no way I can put it on the table for discussion.” The unspoken end of that sentence has to do with the fear of what Kurt Vonnegut’s *Book of Bokonon* called a “pool-pah,” loosely translated, divine wrath, or, a really big, unmanageable mess.

I understand the concern; it is a legitimate one. Since the widespread emergence of the Advanced Placement curriculum in the mid 1960’s, it has successfully established and maintained an identity as the gold standard of transcript currency for college preparatory schools. It is something that virtually all independent school parents and students believe they understand and clearly expect, and it is what colleges and universities say they want.

Families who visit colleges and universities and hear a presentation by someone from the admissions office very frequently get this message: “If you would like to attend our fine and very competitive institution, it is extremely important that you take all of the AP courses you can.” While that is what college admissions people say, it is not, actually, what they mean. What they mean is that it is very

important that you take all of *the most challenging courses* your school has to offer. So, the question then becomes, are the APs the most challenging courses your school offers? More to the point, is the AP the most relevant, substantive and challenging advanced level curriculum you are able to offer?

I am a recovering AP teacher myself, and in the interest of full disclosure, I will say explicitly at this point that I am not an admirer of the AP curriculum. One of the most significant curricular changes I presided over as Headmaster of Crossroads School in Santa Monica was the transition away from the AP to internally authored advanced level curricula. So this is not intended as an objective piece on the AP. While replacing the AP may well not be the right thing for every college preparatory school, I think that talking openly and analytically about the pros and cons of that program is the right thing. The AP conversation, in fact, is a tremendous opportunity and an excellent platform and context for some deep and rich reflection, evaluation, and analysis of the school’s curriculum as a whole, and of its advanced level options in particular.

Holding any kind of public conversation about the AP (and by public I mean anything other than a closed-door conversation between academic dean and department chair, or head of school and curriculum coordinator, for example) is, as I said at the outset, viewed by most school heads as risky business indeed. It does not have to be that way, and a truly open conversation about the appropriateness of the AP curriculum offers considerable opportunities, regardless of the ultimate conclusion. Framing the conversation as “let’s look at how and how well the AP is serving our students” rather than asking “should we dump

the AP?" will be by far the more productive exercise. In my experience, faculty really want permission to have the AP conversation and a sense of safety about doing so. Whether a school chooses to replace the AP curriculum or not is not the most significant part of the conversation. The most significant part of the conversation is having it in the first place.

Independent schools are endlessly examining, analyzing, modifying and restructuring their curricula. For some reason the AP program is often exempted from that kind of thoughtful scrutiny because it has become something like the wallpaper of "academic excellence" (a phrase that probably appears in the view book of every college preparatory school in the universe). Does the AP, arguably the ultimate test prep curriculum, really deserve that kind of free pass? To borrow from Socrates, I think it is worth considering whether the unexamined curriculum is actually worth teaching.

Here are eight questions that I believe are important to ask about the AP and how it works (or not) in your school. Giving faculty a way to have genuine dialogue on these questions will provide some very valuable information about the beliefs, values and priorities that inform their work and the character of your school.

1. Does the AP program (content, style, methodology) align with the fundamental core values, philosophy and practice of your school?

This question can generate some interesting and useful discussion about just what the fundamental core values of your school actually are. It will generate dialogue across departments and grade levels that will surface imbedded assumptions about the values of the school with respect to intellectual rigor, academic standards, and methods of assessment. If it emerges, for example, that the AP is the only area where high-stakes, one-shot, paper and pencil assessment is considered appropriate, why is that?

2. What might the senior year look like without the AP?

How many times have you been in conversations either lamenting the extent to which the AP drives and shapes the senior year, or in animated, blue-sky discussions about the exciting, substantive, creative things that could be done with second semester seniors... if it weren't for the AP. Giving faculty permission and encouragement to conjure with this question alone *just for the sake of discussion* will likely yield some interesting results.

And what about the extent to which the AP drives and shapes the curriculum of the *entire* 9-12 academic program, *and* the middle school if you have one, *and* even the elementary school if you have one of those also. Not to mention collateral impact on such programs as fine and

performing arts and athletics. How well *is* all that working for everyone?

3. Does the AP drive course selection by students (and parents) in positive ways?

If it is generally agreed that the AP attracts the students in your school who will most deeply engage with and benefit from them and that these courses represent an appropriate proportion of their course load, that is excellent. Far too often what I hear from academic deans and counselors is that students load up on AP's because it will "look good on the transcript," because college admissions folks have told them it is essential, because their parents insisted on it, or simply because they thought they had no choice. So powerful is the AP mystique that it draws students into classes in which they have no real interest, and this forecloses their opportunity to get involved in classes or activities where they may have genuine passion and aptitude. If that is happening in your school, is that OK?

4. If the AP program had never existed and someone came knocking on your door wanting to sell it to you, would you buy?

This question generally leads quickly to other questions. Why did we originally make the decision to offer the AP? Do the original reasons for offering the AP still obtain? Do we continue to offer the AP because it is "what everyone does," or because we are clear that it is the best advanced level curricula we are able to offer?

If the answer to the primary question above is no, what, exactly, are the reasons you are continuing to offer it? That is a serious question.

5. Are your students getting the putative preparation, course placement and credit advantages in college that they believed would accrue to them through taking AP courses?

This is something worth actually checking with your alumni. The April, 2006, edition of *NSTA REPORTS* featured a study of 18,000 college students conducted by researchers from Harvard University and The University of Virginia that "found minimal evidence that high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses significantly increase college performance in the sciences."¹ Increasingly colleges and universities are declining to give advanced standing for AP courses, accepting only scores of 5 for placement purposes, and/or requiring even students with 5's to take departmental placement tests before determining appropriate course enrollment.

6. Would replacing the AP with internally authored advanced level courses be "dumbing down" your curriculum? Why?

While a reflexive response to this question from students, faculty and parents might well be yes, unpacking

the thinking behind that response can be quite illuminating. Among kids there is status associated with how many AP's they are taking. Among faculty there is a status associated with being an AP teacher (and even more status in being an AP reader). Among parents there is status associated with how many AP's my kid is taking. Among all groups there is a common assumption that AP equals the best that can be offered. Do you and your faculty believe that is true?

7. Is the AP really strengthening your students' college admissions profiles?

Stipulating to the conventional wisdom on AP and competitive college admissions, this one really puzzles me. All the books, and all the high-priced "independent" college counselors, and the college counselors in your own school are advising students applying to competitive colleges and universities that one of the keys to "the thick envelope" is to *differentiate* themselves. Find what will make you stand out from the hoards of other highly qualified students vying for admission to Excellent University, they are told. And yet the vast majority of schools preparing students for those highly selective colleges and universities are sending along applicants all of whom have *virtually identical transcripts*: AP Biology, AP US Government & Politics, AP Calculus, etc., etc., etc. If you were a college admissions person plowing through mountains of AP-laden transcripts and then came across, say, a transcript that had no AP Biology, but rather The Marine Ecology of The Urban California Coast; Advanced Study in Biology and Chemistry, and, say, A Social and Economic History of Southern California 1945-1995; Advanced Study in History and Economics, what would you think about that kind of differentiation?

8. Why, as an independent school, is it a good idea to outsource the top end of your curriculum?

Independent schools justifiably take pride in their independence because it is what allows them to hew to a specific set of values, priorities and practices that they are able to put in service of their philosophy. The families who entrust their sons and daughters to our schools do so because they believe in us and what we value in education, and because we take pains to know who our students are and what they most need to succeed academically, socially and personally. Why then would we outsource the top end of our curriculum to a third party who does not know our school, does not know our students, will specify what we have to teach, and will then charge a fee to let us know how successful we have been in delivering their curriculum to our students?

There are a number of things that it is important for schools reevaluating the AP not to do. Probably chief among them is framing the question in any form of "Should we *drop* the AP?" That is almost guaranteed to

generate precisely the kind of furor that will obscure if not completely obviate productive discussion on the issue. The effective version of the question is some form of "Should we *replace* the AP with our own internally designed advanced level courses?"

Replacing the AP is not simply changing curriculum the way it can be changed in other areas and at other levels. Replacing the AP is really about changing a belief system, one that has been thoughtfully and purposefully cultivated for the past fifty years or so. This is an area in which it is essential that a school make haste slowly and do a great deal of process through a comprehensive communication plan with all constituents, internal and external. When Crossroads School announced publicly that the school would be replacing the AP with the Crossroads Advanced Studies (CAS) curriculum, that came four years (less one month) after the initial public conversation in an Upper School faculty meeting. And, that public announcement gave a two-year lead-time before the AP curriculum would actually be discontinued and the CAS curriculum implemented. This allowed time for the decision to "sink in" with current and applicant families, and it allowed time for the faculty to fully develop the new advanced level courses. Some of the CAS courses are very similar in content to the prior APs, like Calculus for example. Others, like Biology, have been almost totally rewickered.

Crossroads is now in its third post-AP year. None of the anxieties that prevailed during the transition process came to pass. There was no exodus of students. Exactly one family (in the Middle School) left the school citing the AP change as the reason. The number and quality of applicants did not decline. In fact, the national and global financial circumstances notwithstanding, strong applications K-12 have increased each of the last two years. And the college admissions picture for graduating seniors has become even stronger across Early Decision, Early Action, and regular admissions to competitive colleges and universities.

The AP conversation is a big one. Unpacking reality and perception about this program and its fit with your school is not a simple undertaking. Coming to genuine clarity on the issue requires significant, planning, time, effort and patience. But it is absolutely worth it.

A clear understanding of the utility, impact, and opportunity cost of offering the Advanced Placement curriculum provides any school with a tremendously useful window on the entire academic landscape of the institution and valuable insight into some of the more nuanced dimensions of the teaching and learning experience in your school.

ENDNOTES

1 *NSTA Reports* is a publication of the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), 1840 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201-3000