

Friday Focus

From Emory

Is 'AP' All it's Cracked Up to Be? (Providence Christian School and Advanced Placement Courses)

Recently, in the course of discussion with a parent, I was reminded that we might do well to re-define the scope and parameters of exactly what we have as a vision for classical and Christian education here at Providence.

As PCS delves into the purchase of additional computer hardware and software to enhance classroom instruction, my discussion with this parent concerned the incredible potential that exists in the area of technology. The concept of importing specialized instruction and course offerings on the high school level and the potential positive impact it can have on our school is exciting. As we were talking, this parent suggested that "Maybe now we can begin to offer AP courses."

I paused for a second and then briefly attempted to give an overview of our current view of the structure and nature of AP courses and testing, but I soon realized that that was not the venue for such debate. But, it did make me realize that further communication on this area was likely a good thing, since many people generally view the status of AP offerings by a school as a measuring stick of true commitment to high academic standards.

*Thus, this week, I have decided to re-run a Focus from two years ago in regard to the subject of Advanced Placement courses. **Have a great spring break!***

Over the course of the last few years in education, we have seen a surge in the movement of high schools offering courses giving students an opportunity to receive college credit for subjects taken while the student is still in high school. Cooperating high schools have students register for core area courses that afford them the opportunity to take the national comprehensive exam for that area at the end of the school year. If the student passes, the university for which they register usually allows them to exempt the freshmen entry-level course(s) for that subject. This program is called AP for Advanced Placement.

One advantage for the family is the obvious 'savings' afforded the college-bound student, as they will not have to pay tuition expenses for the areas in which they have proven proficiency by passing the exam. It also could be considered a time-saving advantage in that a student would be able to graduate sooner in a degree program, or perhaps have opportunity for a dual-degree in the same amount of time in which a non-AP student graduates when taking the normal degree sequence.

What has also transpired over the course of time is the perception by some in the educational community that a measuring-stick for 'great high schools' is whether they offer AP coursework. If a school offers a completely comprehensive array of AP opportunities in every core academic area, they are regarded as 'truly dedicated' to academic excellence. I feel that this is not only greatly presumptive, but it may even foster an antithetical motivation to what we in classical and Christian education say we truly believe.

If the motive for offering AP coursework is a desire to produce more in-depth study and understanding of a subject area, then why shouldn't *every* student be afforded that opportunity? One of the positives of the trivium and the classical approach is to challenge every one of our students to gain, understand, and process information in a different way. In contrast, the behavioral model of education is often guilty of treating the ascension in education as a step-by-step process of the memorization, in segments, of certain information, and then moving on to tackle other links in the chain until one arrives with degree in hand. Rather, the classical approach, although built on basic fundamentals of educational information, explores the subjects with greater depth and variety, to create in students not only a deeper understanding, but hopefully a deeper appreciation for the entirety of a subject. Built into this approach is the equipping of that student for future exploration of his own.

The true mark of a quality education is not simply a mind full of facts. It is accumulated knowledge with a hunger for more, the faculty to reason soundly, the ability to express what has been learned, and most importantly the acquisition of the proper tools with which to continue the learning process throughout an entire lifetime. It is not enough to merely learn subjects, a student must learn *how* to think and *how* to learn.

(Quoted from a brochure of an ACCS member school, *The River Academy*, Wenatchee, WA.)

What concerns me is that the major motivation of offering AP is likely a desire to ‘hurry-up’ the degree-obtaining process into as short an amount of time as possible, at the least possible expense (granting a student college credit while they are still in high school).

I believe that the major motivating factor is quite self-centered and fosters more of the self-indulging anxiety already common in a senior student’s family. If we truly stand for all of the principles we purport to exhort as a CCE school, I believe we must guard against the temptation to ‘sell-out’ to the AP mindset.

Additionally, one of the concepts of the CCE approach is to steer clear of ‘tracking’ when possible. Obviously, there are areas within the curriculum that are going to separate students based on ability (most notably the higher math and physics). But, otherwise, every effort is made to keep the ‘class’ intact in pressing each student to attain the highest level of learning without softening the presentation of difficult concepts. I believe this is most effectively done in the admissions office by requiring placement examination of incoming students to ensure that applicants are grade-level proficient for our classes. One of the issues with a segregated AP curriculum is the creation of ‘advanced’ courses for the more academically gifted and a ‘general curriculum’ for the others. The natural temptation for a teacher is to pour more of their time and energy into the ‘advanced’ class and to plod through with the others. With our student population, every student and class should be ‘advanced’ and our expectations of individual students, as a school culture, should be the highest of highs.

Would we be less ‘academic’ if we avoid the AP course frenzy? I say, no! In fact, as I was sharing my thoughts for this article with our administrative staff, one of them shared an article they had recently read concerning this subject. One quote stands out:

Over time we came to the conclusion that the AP program at Fieldston was not only at odds with our educational and social purpose, but it lacked courses with multicultural content; in some disciplines, most notably history and science, it left little room for divergence. The AP courses encouraged teachers to cover a great breadth of material superficially, leaving little time for in-depth analysis, emphasizing speed of assimilation and memorization of information rather than a deep understanding of ideas and themes.

“*Changing Course for the Better*”, Rachel Friis Stettler & Joseph Algrant, NAIS Publications. E-bulletin October 1, 2007.

Read the entire article at: www.nais.org/publications/ismagazinearticle.cfm?Itemnumber=144300&sn.ItemNu.

The key for us is to not lose sight of who we are and what our calling is in the midst of the AP movement. The question of the validity of offering AP courses in a classical and Christian school and how it challenges the very essence of the scope and method of what we are attempting to accomplish is one with which we continue to grapple. Every challenge in the educational culture is an opportunity for us to re-define who we are and what we feel called to by our Lord.