**AP: How Much?**

Dec 2, 2015

It's hard to get the media to report on a moderate position.  In cynical moments, I assume that this is because reporting on sensible solutions does not get the kind of reader traffic that reporting on ridiculous solutions gets.

I was reminded of this less-noble assumption while reading a New Jersey article indicating that [AP students are losing their childhood](http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/students-load-up-on-tougher-courses-1.1456207?page=all).  (Okay, that summary was over the top, but heck, I need readers, too.)  Essentially the article asks the question:  Is AP worth the stress?  Advocates for the worth side of AP are from the College Board; opponents from the stress side come from various locations in academia.

Not surprisingly (and to the credit of the author), the article does not answer the question.  But it does, I'll confess, ask an interesting question:  **How much AP is too much for a student?**  There is no algorithm for this that I'm aware of; after years of having this question posed to me by lots of students, I feel like I should have an answer by now.  So let me take a shot.  I want to address students in this post, since we are approaching the course selection season at most high schools; let me break this question into several component questions.

**Does AP have worth?**

Answer:  Usually.  Better answer:  Almost always.  I don't want to belabor this; my statement to students on this is pretty simple.  Most students who are planning to attend college should consider taking at least one AP course in high school.  This is for more reasons than simply creating the opportunity to gain college credit through AP exams.  The experience of the rigor of the course and the intensity of the exam can be valuable for students who want to be ready for college.

**Is AP stressful?**

Answer:  If the AP course has any value, the answer is probably:  Usually.  [Given that academic intensity is a important factor in future success for college-bound students](https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html), and [given that a little stress is good for the academic soul,](http://www.education.com/reference/article/anxiety-classroom/) experiencing some stress in a course that is challenging is actually desirable.  If a student does not experience academic stress, her motivation to achieve disappears.  Conversely, too much stress messes with learning, among other things.

**So:  Is the stress of AP worthwhile?**

And here's where it gets hard.  The College Board has been touting AP as "rigor worth doing," which works well as a slogan and is, I think, true most of the time.  But *how much* AP is worth doing?  Should *all* students "AP up"? Specifically, should three, four or more AP courses be normal for students?

And there is no single answer for this, considering that every student's decision-making process is as varied and indistinguishable as any stew that incorporates student interests, student academic goals, specific AP courses considered, extracurricular demands, academic talent, grit, teacher talent and college demands and expectations, as well as (pick your own wild card).  But, risk taker that I am, I'm willing to dispense a little advice for those of you who are looking seriously at how much AP might work for you.

* The number of AP courses you take is negotiable.  There is nothing that says that you have to take a lot of AP, but AP does offer a great opportunity that should keep you from selling yourself short both to admissions processes and to college work.
* If you're a valedictorian, or if your GPA is north of 3.9, AP up.  Don't run from this challenge.  AP will test you in good ways.  If you have a stellar GPA with no AP in your experience, your transcript will just embarrass you.  Give yourself a mix of AP courses that will substitute for required high school courses (notably, English), elective courses that you might run into in college, and of course some courses that draw your interest.
* On that subject, if your school offers an AP course in a career path you know you want to follow, take it.  Try Calculus, Statistics, Biology, Psychology.  Maybe you won't get credit for the course in your major, but you will get a great exposure to the discipline.
* If you are considering following a STEM field in the future, take an AP STEM course; please get comfortable with the ideas that you're going to get beat up by the course and that that's okay.
* If your school offers Statistics or Environmental Science or Psychology and you think those courses might be something you could need in your future, try taking them in high school.  How will these help you, you ask?  Live a little longer; you'll find out.
* If you're trying to get into selective colleges that won't give you credit for AP, take AP anyway.  The fact that they're not giving credit doesn't mean that they don't care about AP.  Anyway, this is about getting experience in hard things in a safer place.
* If your high school offers an AP course that seems like it might be fun (in a tough sort of way), but you don't see that course as a possibility for a major field, consider it anyway.  Studio art or history or government or world language might not be your chosen path, but you don't know that yet.  At most colleges you will need elective credits; these could offer you some preferred elective options.
* If you take the course, commit to the exam.  Trust me.  It matters.
* If you haven't decided about college, AP is a great way to find out what you can do and what awaits you if you go.  If you're going to a community college, take AP as a primer for courses and as an credit option if you wind up going to a four-year.
* How many courses?  Get the advice of people who know you and who know AP in your school.  Five APs might be a real problem if you are a 3.5 student who plays sports, has a weekend job and (here's the killer) has a great girlfriend. But some students live for that kind of challenge and thrive on it.

This is incomplete, but I'll sum up this way:  I've always said that I would rather see more of the students in my high school take a little AP than see a few take a lot.  But as for what fits individual students, my advice is:  make smart risks about challenge, be aware of the stress and what it says about you, stay close to adults who know what's going on with you and your choices, and see what you're made of.  I wish you all the best, both in making your choices and in keeping your commitments.

* [](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mhobolth?trk=pulse-det-athr_prof-art_ftr)

**Written by**

[**Mike Hobolth**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mhobolth?trk=pulse-det-athr_prof-art_ftr)