



# The Standardized Test Monopoly That Secretly Runs America's High Schools

“Anyone who works in education knows there are no silver bullets. There is no holy water here”

by Liz Dwyer

Share 1553 May 14, 2017

“The AP exam is a product for which there is not a competitor.”

**IN APRIL, MY 10TH-GRADE SON DID SOMETHING I NEVER MANAGED TO DO IN ANY CLASS EVER:** He finished his entire world history textbook. All 1,258 pages of it. Some parents might breathe a sigh of relief over this accomplishment (as in, whew, my kid is *not* a slacker), but I was skeptical.

“Did you actually learn anything?” I asked him. “Yeah, kinda,” he shrugged, though he admitted that he whipped through some chapters in two or three days. Say what? “Well, we had to finish so we can get ready for the test,” he said.

Ah, yes, the test. By that, he means the Advanced Placement World History Exam, taken by high school students across the United States last Thursday. During the first two weeks of May, the College Board, the nonprofit organization that owns the SAT and the advanced placement program, administered AP exams in world history and 37 other subjects. About 2.7 million high schoolers across the nation took a total of 4.9 million AP exams, which the College Board called “the culmination of their hard work in AP courses throughout the school year.”

High school students like my son crank through chapters, study for hours each night, and take weekly tests because an AP class is supposed to be the equivalent of a college-level course. These teens hope to score high enough on the AP exam to earn college credit or to be placed in a more advanced course, which, given the ever-rising costs of college, seems like a smart move. And colleges, especially top ones, tell students that to be a competitive candidate for admissions, they should take the toughest classes possible, which generally means taking AP.

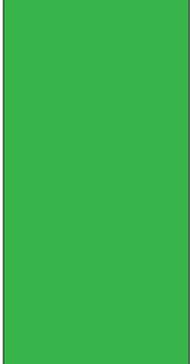
Last year, Nat Malkus, a researcher from the [American Enterprise Institute](#), a conservative-leaning, Washington, D.C.-based think tank, wrote that “AP might be the single happiest education story of the century,” in part because it has “substantially increased access to advanced coursework for all public school students, and the College Board has made that access possible by taking concrete steps to maintain program quality and increase access to underserved students.”

It’s possible the AP exam really does prepare students for higher education, while saving them money in the process. But it’s also likely, as some critics say, that the tests don’t do much other than stress teens out, contribute to the college admissions arms race, and earn the College Board plenty of cash.

“We are agnostic about AP,” says Bob Schaeffer, the public education director of [FairTest](#), the [National Center for Fair & Open Testing](#). “To the extent that they serve as a gateway rather than a gatekeeper to access higher education, that’s fine.” But he adds that “the Pollyanna picture that the College Board paints to sell its product leaves out some important facts. Many colleges are questioning the value of AP scores and some are moving away from automatically granting credit because they do not see some of those courses, which are largely test-prep oriented, as being the equivalent of a real college course.”

AP is now the largest program at the College Board, larger than the SAT in terms of revenue. “That’s why they’re fanning it—it’s a product for which there is not a competitor,” says Schaeffer. “For the SAT, there are two major competitors, one the ACT, which more kids take than the SAT, and the second, the growing number of [test-optional colleges](#). But AP, they have a monopoly on granting [college] credit.”

Schaeffer says the College Board’s nonprofit status is a meaningless distinction. “All that it means is that there are no shareholders to divvy up excess loot,” he says. “They are a billion-dollar-a-year corporation which uses its excess revenue—and they are substantial over its cost—to build fancy buildings down on Wall Street and to pay its executives high six figure, if not seven figure salaries.”



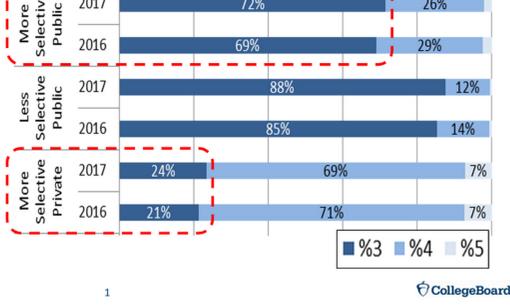
## 2017 AP credit policy trends



**More institutions across all segments are accepting AP Exam scores of 3 for college credit**

**The percent of policies granting credit for AP scores of 3 increased from 64% in 2016 to 66% this year**

- **More selective publics:** improved from 69% to 72%
- **Less selective publics:** improved from 85% to 88%
- **More selective private:** improved from 21% to 24%



Policies granting credit for AP scores are on the rise. Graphic courtesy College Board.

**THE COLLEGE BOARD REPORTED ABOUT \$77 MILLION IN ANNUAL PROFIT AND \$834 MILLION IN NET ASSETS IN 2015.** David Coleman, the president of the College Board [earned nearly \\$900,000 in 2015](#), reported Reuters, and his predecessor, Gaston Caperton, who stepped down in 2012, was widely [criticized](#) for his \$1.3 million annual salary.

“Fundamentally and absolutely, we’re a nonprofit organization,” says Trevor Packer, College Board’s senior vice president of AP and Instruction. Packer, who has been the head of the AP program since 2003, has no business background and is a former educator with a background in English literature. “If the College Board were seeking to bring in money, they would bring in someone very different. Our board of trustees would not have an academic focused on curriculum design running the College Board’s largest program,” he says.

Along with using revenue to cover staffing and operating costs, such as administering and scoring tests nationwide, the College Board, says Packer, uses part of the AP exam fees—\$93 per test—to support AP programs and subsidize low income students’ exam costs. When Packer started at the College Board in 2003, very few low-income students were taking AP classes. “Only 45,000 students in the United States took AP in 1998. That’s now grown to 21 percent of the AP exams being taken by low income students,” he says.

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“That’s where the argument really breaks down where people say the College Board is financially motivated,” says Packer. “If that’s where our concern were, it would actually be a good thing for a smaller proportion of low income students to take the AP exam in proportion to full-fee students. Our subsidies are so significant to our students that that would work against profitability.”

In College Board’s survey of 2016 test takers, “Over 80 percent of AP students agree that after taking AP courses, they feel more confident about doing well in college,” as stated on their [website](#):

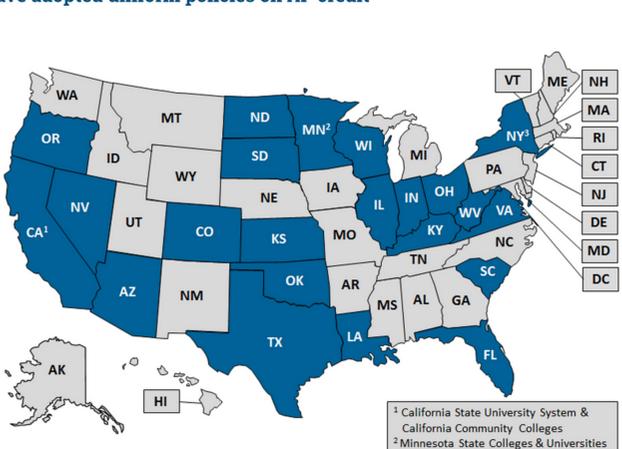
Research shows AP students are more likely to finish their degrees on time, saving the costs of a fifth year of college, which can range in price from \$20,090 to \$45,370, on average. Of the students who don’t participate in AP and who enroll in a four-year college or university, only 30 percent complete their college degrees in four years. A fifth year of college requires students to forgo earnings of about \$32,000, on average. Because AP students are more likely to finish their degrees promptly, they enter the workforce and begin earning income sooner, both lowering their college costs and avoiding forgone income.

Ultimately, says Packer, he’s held accountable for three things: “Are we helping more students learn at a level where they qualify for college credit, and achieve college cost savings, and perform at a higher level in the courses they take?”

## Statewide credit policies



**22 states have adopted uniform policies on AP credit**



<sup>1</sup> California State University System & California Community Colleges  
<sup>2</sup> Minnesota State Colleges & Universities  
<sup>3</sup> State University of New York System

AP credit is increasingly accepted across the U.S. Graphic courtesy College Board.

**DENISE POPE ISN'T FULLY CONVINCED THAT THE AP PROGRAM IS ACHIEVING THOSE GOALS.** A professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education—and one of the authors of a [well-respected research paper](#) for which she reviewed nearly two-dozen studies on the AP program—Pope says many college-bound students (and their parents) see AP classes as merely a tool in the college admissions game.

“I do not want to sound overly negative. They are turning kids onto learning in a way that many many kids would not experience if there was not AP,” says Pope “But for your average kid like yours or mine who are going to be college bound because of who their parents are and where they grow up, there is really this problem of how many (AP classes students are taking) and what are the colleges asking for.”

“When you have a high-stakes, one-shot test, you’re focused on how to beat the exam. It’s human nature.”

One student Pope talked to took 12 AP classes over the course of high school and thought he should enter college as a junior. “And I said, ‘Oh no, honey, that’s not how it works.’ But in his eyes, he’s taking the class, he’s getting a four or five on the test, and he’s assuming that when he enters college all those credits are going to go,” says Pope. “And he busted himself to take 12 AP classes in high school, which is a lot. And he’s looking at me, like, *What are you saying?*”

Kiyomi Morrison, a 19-year-old who graduated from Ramón C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts High School in Los Angeles in 2016, is headed to UCSB in the fall after taking a gap year. Morrison took five AP classes—two in her junior year and three in her senior year—but she isn’t sure yet how much credit UCSB will give her for AP exam scores. However, a friend who will enroll at Cal State Long Beach will “pass out of all the beginning math and English classes,” says Morrison.

A [survey](#) by the College Board of 2016 AP exam takers found that the top two reasons students take AP exams are for college credit and placement—not because they’re interested in the subject. Pope contrasts those reasons with student responses from a survey done by [Challenge Success](#), an organization she co-founded to help counter the overemphasis on grades, test scores, and rote memorization in schools. When Challenge Success asked students why they participated in an extracurricular activity, the top reason students gave is because they love it. Only about 20 percent of teens said that the main reason they’re doing it is so that it will look good on their college applications. So when it comes to AP, “We say, gosh, this is a college-level course. if you don’t love the subject, you’re stuck doing a lot of work, that you don’t love. Why would you make that choice?” says Pope.

Packer says that 23 states have passed legislation requiring public colleges and universities to award credit for AP or IB (International Baccalaureate) scores. “I like those policies because I believe policies should be based on research. If a score does predict how a student will perform, we believe students should have government-supported mandatory college credit.” He recommends that students use [AP Credit Policy](#), a tool on the College Board website that allows teens to type in the name of the college and see exactly what the university is saying about how they will use AP credit. “Students are very pragmatic. They line up the chips and say, ‘Well, this course is going to get me this, so I’m going to be willing to do extra work in high school.’” says Packer.

But Morrison also wishes more of her peers knew that “If you’re just taking AP classes to look good for a college and you overwhelm yourself, it’s going to be detrimental if you fail that class or you’re miserable the whole year.” She and her friends also found it odd that the more selective a college gets—think Ivy League schools—the less likely it is to accept AP credit. “But you need those AP classes [on your transcript] to get into that college so it is a little strange in that respect.”

Pope warns that a student “can take every AP offered and not get into Harvard or Stanford or Berkeley or wherever you want to go to.’ Knowing it’s really a crapshoot, there’s not really a whole lot of rhyme and reasons when you get to those top level colleges.” And her research disputes the idea that AP classes directly cause students to be more likely to succeed in college.

Packer agrees that Pope is right that the College Board should be “very careful about we claim. No one should be claiming that AP is a silver bullet in education,” he says. “Anyone who works in education knows there are no silver bullets. There is no holy water here.”

At the same time, he says there is new experimental research “that does allow for causal claims to be made.” Packer says “the signaling effects of AP scores can have a causal impact on what students choose to major in,” and when a student is searching for validation, doing well in an AP class and exam can provide a confidence boost. Although he’d love to see a study that explicitly tracked one group of kids who took AP and one that didn’t, “The reasons those things aren’t done, of course, is because of the ethics involved,” says Packer. “Because there is a strong indication that there is a benefit of getting an AP class versus another class, so getting a bunch of kids and telling them, ‘No you don’t get this,’” would be wrong.”

The bottom line, though, says Schaeffer, is that the problem with AP is that everything in terms of college credit depends on that final AP exam score. “Anecdotal reports from many schools indicate that in the weeks before AP exam time, AP courses are test prep,” says Schaeffer. “When you have a high-stakes, one-shot exam like that, what happens at every level, from kindergarten through occupational life is that the course is focused on how to beat the exam and not on anything else. It’s human nature,” he says.

**ON THURSDAY NIGHT, I ASKED MY SON HOW HE FELT NOW THAT THE AP EXAM WAS OVER.** “Relieved,” he said with a sigh. He told me how hungry he got during the four-hour long exam, and what he wrote about for the essay portion. “But do you think you’ll remember anything you read in the book—or that was talked about in class a month from now when school is?” I asked. He rolled his eyes and smiled. “Yeah, I doubt it,” he said. “But is that even the point?” ●

*Image via [Pexels](#)*

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