

STUDENT SUCCESS IN ADVANCED ACADEMICS: IDENTIFIERS AND
PREDICTORS

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ABSTRACT

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Research indicates improved academic performance and higher college attendance rates for students participating in advanced courses in high school (Shaw et al., 2012). Advanced academic programs may also build human capital while preparing students for college by exposing them to higher-level curriculum and teaching time management skills (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Unfortunately, due to the continued underrepresentation of minority and low-income students, these programs have developed reputations for being too exclusive (The Broad Foundation, 2013). Furthermore, it is argued that students capable of excelling in advanced academics courses fail to be appropriately identified as high achieving and do not participate. An expanded literature review will focus on the impact of access, student preparedness prior to enrollment in advanced classes, and the social-emotional needs of advanced students. As the two largest advanced academic programs, most data pertains to the College Board's Advanced Placement Program and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Taking at least one advanced course within the first two years of high school increases a student's chances of graduating by nearly 10%, and of enrolling in college between five and six percent (Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics' Condition of Education report, "the overall college enrollment rate for young adults increased from 35 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2017" (2019, p.150). The labor market and career landscape, spurred largely by the continued progression of technology, require individuals be significantly more prepared than in years prior. Both two-year and four-year academic institutions provide possible avenues for students to acquire the tools necessary to be successful in the current postsecondary arena. K-12 schools therefore have to prioritize college and career readiness as they plan and implement academic systems on their campuses.

Purpose

This expanded literature review will focus on research and published studies regarding the indicators and predictors of success for students in advanced academics. The practices involved in identifying high achieving/gifted students, tactics for preparing students in the years prior to enrollment in AP or IB classes as well as the unique social and emotional needs of advanced students, which may require tailored support systems.

Significance of Study

Advanced academic programs aim to better prepare students for postsecondary success. College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Program and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program are two of the most prominent examples of such programs in the United States. The Advanced Placement Program offers 38 college level courses to "academically prepared and willing students" to take in high school, for which they will earn high school credit upon passing the class and college credit upon passing the corresponding exam given in May (College Board, 2019a, p.1). The courses are offered independently of one another, and a student may take one AP course or ten each year, depending on how many are offered on campus.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme also offers college level classes during high school for which students may earn college credit as well as high school credit upon successful completion of exams in May. As the International Baccalaureate states "the aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people, who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate, 2017a, p. 7), the holistic nature of the program is apparent. In addition to taking college level courses, students are required to take many more foreign language classes than their non IB peers, complete an extensive research paper, perform regular community service hours, and complete an overarching portfolio throughout the junior and senior year. IB courses are largely interdependent, a contrast from the a la cart nature of AP courses.

Trends reflect an ever-growing number of students are enrolling in AP and IB classes in high school. As these programs are encouraged by counselors and parents as contributing to college readiness and are weighted more heavily in terms of Grade Point Average (GPA), it is not surprising. Participation in College Board's AP program continues to expand, with roughly 1.24 million high school graduates taking at least one AP exam in 2018, up from approximately 752,000 in 2008 (College Board, 2018b). IB had 16,535 diploma candidates in 2017, compared to only 10,407 in 2013 (International Baccalaureate, 2018).

Enrollment in advanced academic courses continues to soar as they are often recommended as the most effective academic preparation for the competitive educational and professional environments that follow high school. For the sake of equity and legitimate postsecondary preparation, schools must not only increase the availability of such courses, but also ensure students are being afforded every opportunity to succeed in them, prior to enrollment and throughout completion. College Board and IB have established open enrollment policies, removing prerequisites for those courses in an attempt to increase the participation of minority and low-income students in the AP and IB programs. It is the responsibility of the educational institutions to remove remaining obstacles for students wishing to challenge themselves with a rigorous course load in high school. However, as mentioned by the Broad Foundation's *Road to Equity* (2013) report, very few districts are able to increase participation in advanced academics programs such as Advanced Placement, without decreasing performance.

As enrollment in AP classes increase, performance on the corresponding exams decrease (Broad Foundation, 2013). Because 91% of students in the United States attend a high school that offers an AP program, simply providing access to these courses is not enough. While participation in advance academic programs by minority students and those from low income households has increased over the past decade, significant discrepancies remain in the ability of these students to succeed (Theokas & Saris, 2013). Further proof of the difficulty faced when attempting to close academic achievement gaps between minority or low-income students and others is the recent announcement of the Environmental Context Dashboard (more commonly referred to as an adversity score) by the College Board. This tool will provide college admissions officers contextual information regarding the high school and neighborhood to which the student belongs, in addition to the student's SAT score (College Board, 2019b). David Coleman, the CEO of College Board, insists this tool will provide students performing below average when compared to all students, but vastly outperforming their peers in spite of limited resources and academic opportunities (Sanchez, 2019).

The dilemma faced by schools across the country as they remove barriers to courses previously reserved for only those students following a specific trajectory while maintaining overall performance in those courses is a difficult one. Previously the path to advanced academic classes tended to be predictable and presented few surprises. This was largely because it typically involved a rather small group of students being identified as gifted and talented in elementary school prior to being enrolled in specific classes through middle school; classes where they are consistently motivated, challenged, and

ultimately groomed for the advanced coursework they will enroll in once they reach high school. This process has resulted in an underrepresentation of minority students, as well as those coming from low-income households, as a single path for success and preparation does not address the needs of all learners. Schools struggle with the balance of providing equitable access to advanced academics programs, which results in a much larger participation in these classes, and implementing effective processes and systems beginning in elementary school, which allow for sustained or increased success rates in said programs overall.

Research Methodology

Several resources were employed to gather reliable data for the expanded literature review. Peer reviewed journals concerning advanced academics, gifted education, identification of gifted students, academic success in AP/IB, etc., were utilized. These were obtained through academic databases Academic Search Premier, EBSCOHost, and ERIC. Additionally data was collected directly from the websites such as the Office of Civil Rights, College Board, IB, and Texas Education Agency to ensure current and accurate information.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Access to Advanced Academic Programs

A gifted and talented student is defined in the Texas Education Code as: a child or youth who performs at or shows the potential for performing at a remarkably high level of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment and who:

- (1) exhibits high performance capability in an intellectual, creative, or artistic area;
- (2) possesses an unusual capacity for leadership; or
- (3) excels in a specific academic field. (21, T.E.C.,§121, 1995)

Advanced academic courses such as AP and IB are often the means by which gifted and talented (GT) students are provided services beyond the self-contained and/or pull out programs offered in elementary schools and in some middle schools. Per Chapter 42 of the Texas Education Code, schools will receive an allotment towards advanced academics programs such as AP or IB, otherwise designated for GT services if GT students are being served specifically through these programs (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Because GT and advanced academic programs typically serve the same students, the same district or campus coordinator often oversees them. For this reason, many GT classes are structured similarly to an honors, AP, or IB classroom a student may encounter later in their academic career.

Methods for identifying gifted and talented students vary by district, and may involve universal screening, referral/recommendation processes, or both. Testing for identification is largely reliant on IQ, though research suggests IQ may vary greatly over the course of an individual's lifetime (Sternberg, 2017). Once identified as gifted or high achieving, a student is given the option to enroll in classes designed specifically for their learning needs. As the majority of GT students will eventually enroll in AP or IB courses, the low numbers of African American and Hispanic students participating in gifted education programs is worth noting. According to the Office of Civil Rights' Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), during the 2013-2014 school year African Americans accounted for 9.9% of students participating in gifted education programs, while Hispanic/Latino students accounted for 18%. White students accounted for 58.2% of students enrolled in gifted and talented education (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). To demonstrate the relevance: In 2014, African Americans made up approximately 8.1% of students participating in the AP program, while Hispanics made up 17.7%. White students accounted for 56.1% of all students enrolled in Advanced Placement Courses (College Board, 2014). Students historically underrepresented in advanced academic programs in high school are similarly represented in GT programs. Interestingly, while more than half of the students enrolled in public schools come from low-income households, there is no definitive data regarding their participation in gifted education programs (Hamilton et al., 2018).

By design, AP and IB Programs involve ability grouping, defined as “re-grouping students for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level”

(Fiedler, Lange, & Weinbrenner, 2002, p. 108). Elementary and middle school students identified as gifted or high ability may be placed in classes or pulled out at designated times throughout the week with others identified similarly to receive higher-level instruction through the gifted/talented program. At the secondary level, as mentioned above, AP and IB programs are often the means by which the needs of GT students are served. Ability grouping has proven academically beneficial to high achieving students, who exhibit higher levels of engagement in classes with other highly capable individuals (Benbow & Stanley, 1996). Many report feeling less self-conscious when grouped with other advanced students, sharing they may feel it necessary to 'hide' their intellectual ability from peers in general education classes for fear of bullying and similar. It is not a surprise that research suggests an advanced student is likely to achieve greater academic accomplishments if they participate in advanced coursework rather than general education classes, where they may not feel comfortable performing at their full potential. This is particularly true for minority students (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009). A high achieving student that was not identified as gifted and talented, and as a result did not participate in a class or program with high achieving peers, is less likely to demonstrate their full academic potential or participate in challenging courses later in their academic career.

As stated above, access to gifted education classes depends upon identification of a student as GT. Schools may offer universal screening, where every student in a given grade level on campus is formally tested for ability and/or achievement. The results of the assessment are used as an identification tool for recommending students for more

extensive cognitive ability/IQ testing. Universal screening is accompanied by substantial costs to the organization. The most common system for identifying GT students relies on referrals and recommendations for formal testing by the parents and teachers of students. As mentioned by Card and Giuliana (2016), when universal screening is implemented in place of the process of parent/teacher referrals, the identification of minority students, low-income students, as well as English Language learners identified as gifted and talented increases. It is suggested that this is due possibly to lower levels of academic involvement and awareness of available academic programs by the parents of minority students, which make it less likely they will initiate a referral for their child to be tested for gifted and talented services. Additionally, when considering teacher referrals and recommendations, unless all general education classroom teachers have been trained to recognize the tendencies of GT students, they may mistake behavioral issues as indicative of the absence of a student's higher ability (Lakin, 2016). On campuses considered high need or those in urban environments, teachers are likely faced with higher student counts in environments that pose more immediate safety concerns, such as a community with a high crime rate. As student safety and wellbeing are the top priority for teachers, they are less able to evaluate students for characteristics indicating GT ability effectively.

Often, universal screening is offered once during kindergarten. All subsequent testing will require the recommendation or referral of a parent or teacher. Districts, to increase participation of historically underrepresented populations in advanced academics courses, have started utilizing additional tools that are effective at identifying high achieving students later in their educational careers. College Board describes its AP

Potential tool as a research-backed instrument that identifies students perhaps overlooked previously that are likely to succeed in AP courses by evaluating their PSAT or NMSQT test scores (College Board, 2015). Prior to 2014, eighth graders in districts offering the ACT assessment on their campuses were evaluated for unrecognized ability using the ACT EXPLORE test, allowing them the opportunity to join advanced classes long after initial GT testing. ACT EXPLORE has since been replaced with the ACT Aspire assessment system, which measures a variety of cognitive skills in addition to measuring growth year over year beginning in third grade (Radunzel, Mattern, & Allen, (2015). The utilization of tools that assess cognitive ability throughout the educational careers rather than a single occasion

Preparedness for Advanced Academics

While advanced academic courses such as AP and IB are limited to students in high school, preparations for the critical thinking and rigor of these course should begin in the years prior (The National Center for Educational Achievement [NCEA], 2010). Successfully acquiring new knowledge is largely dependent on the possession of prior, relevant knowledge (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006). Many students find it difficult to manage the additional expectations of AP and IB courses, especially if the classes in which they were enrolled in years prior were not aligned. Study skills, time management, and critical thinking are only a few crucially important components to student success in these courses, which may be easily incorporated into the K-8 curriculum.

Vertical teaming allows for collaboration between teachers from different grade levels, teaching similar content. Acknowledgement of the gaps in knowledge possessed by students entering high school and enrolling in advanced courses campuses has resulted in administrators facilitating the regular collaboration of teachers from various grade levels of the same content through vertical planning meetings. During these meetings, teachers may share data regarding student performance, challenges observed in the classroom setting, as well as desired ultimate outcomes (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009). Awareness of a common goal provides the opportunity for teachers at all grade levels to incorporate the skills and foundational knowledge needed in subsequent years into their curriculum. College Board acknowledged the benefit of this group effort between teachers, promoting creation of AP Vertical Teams as best practice. AP Vertical teams are described as a team “of teachers within specific subject areas, committed to improving student preparation through increased teacher-to-teacher communication and vertical alignment of the curriculum” (College Board, 2002, p. 2). Though unsuccessful as a stand alone initiative, vertical planning has been incorporated into the improved framework for their official Pre-AP program.

College Board has promoted their Pre-AP program for years, but recently declared it as the official precursor to Advanced Placement courses in high school. The College Board’s overview of the Pre-AP program states “Pre-AP courses get students ready for AP and other college-level coursework. And they’re designed for ALL students and to be the standard, baseline course in their particular subjects” (College Board, 2018a, p. 5). Previously, Pre-AP was used by schools to signify honors classes without

needing College Board's approval. However, in an effort to more effectively align advanced classes offered in middle school to the AP classes available to students in high school, College Board now requires course audits and teacher trainings similar to those long required by participation in the AP program. Schools choosing to participate in the newly licensed Pre-AP programs will replace all on level courses with Pre-AP courses. This is anticipated to increase the willingness of minority and low-income students to participate in AP and other advanced classes because they are more confident they have received adequate preparation in prior courses.

Similar to College Board's Pre-AP program, IB offers the Primary Years Programme (PYP) to elementary students and the Middle Years Programme (MYP) to middle school students. PYP strives to establish the fundamentals of its learner profile, a constant throughout the IB program's entirety. The learner profile includes such character traits as knowledgeable, principled, and reflective (International Baccalaureate, 2017b). Students participating in the PYP are well familiar with the expectations of IB by the time they reach high school. The MYP is similar in concept to the Pre-AP program, and International Baccalaureate states "Students who complete the MYP are well-prepared to undertake the IB Diploma Programme" (International Baccalaureate, 2016, p. 2).

Social and Emotional Considerations

Stress may be defined as environmental or perceived stress. Environmental stress is defined as "environmental events or chronic conditions that objectively threaten the

physical and/or psychological health or well-being of individuals of a particular age in a particular society” (Grant et al., 2003, p. 449). Perceived stress (often referred to as psychological stress) was first described by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984, and involves the cognitive evaluation of situation which concludes the individual lacks the necessary resources to manage, thereby negatively impacting their well-being (Grant et al., 2003). Recent research performed by Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008) indicates that students enrolled in advanced academics courses report higher levels of perceived stress than students enrolled in general education classes. As these students are facing a more rigorous, time demanding course load, in addition to, the normative stressors of adolescence, this is not particularly surprising. However, the established inverse relationship between stress and academic achievement is not consistently demonstrated in advanced students (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008), suggesting it is possible to mitigate the effects of stress in these students using in-school support systems and similar.

Students enrolled in general education classes tend to report stress due to circumstances more attributed to the transitional phase of adolescence than to academics. Other than low grades, stressors such as family disagreements, social dilemmas, or trouble with significant others were most prominent. Advanced students on the other hand reported academic stressors such as college applications, SAT/ACT performance, etc. (Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009).

It has been suggested that a student’s locus of control, defined by Rotter (1966) as the way an individual perceives the outcomes on situations; whether it is viewed as a

result of their choices and actions, or as out of their control and a result of outside forces (Rotter, 1966). It has been suggested that teachers and counselors play a role in a student's academic ambitions and postsecondary goals, as a more positive locus of control leads to more motivation and better academic performance. Student perceptions of how they are viewed by their teachers, and the motivation offered by both teachers and counselors to attempt academic and professional pursuits they may have otherwise considered out of reach (Flower & Moore, 2003). Standardized tests and the ever-increasing amount of content needing to be covered often affects the time available to teachers to build meaningful relationships with students. Counselors burdened with scheduling as well as college application preparation may find it difficult to find time to have meaningful conversations with the students they oversee from an organizational standpoint. School-wide initiatives focusing on improvement of campus culture, which is closely aligned to relationships, along with professional development offering best practices and ideas regarding methods for building relationships with students are possible approaches to positively impacting students' locus of control. Summer camps where new students were introduced to the expectations of advanced academics as well as tools and strategies which will serve them well as they navigate through these rigorous courses, along with the organization of small 'cohorts' of students who are scheduled regular time with counselors to discuss issues such as time management and stress have shown promise for improving performance in advanced academics programs for African American students. Paired with a strategic recruitment operation, participation of

historically underrepresented groups is increased along with their overall performance (Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013).

Student engagement contributes greatly to student success and mental well-being, and is comprised of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements. *Behavioral engagement* includes participation in academic and extracurricular activities, as well as the display of particular learning behaviors. *Emotional engagement* (often referred to as *affective engagement*) is the positive sense of belonging to and fondness of school, including teachers and classmates. *Cognitive engagement* is the utilization of certain strategies to self-manage and direct actions in a productive manner (Wang & Peck, 2012). Positive behavioral, emotional, and cognitive practices are related to greater academic performance and mental well-being. Students who are more involved, have a positive view of their school, and are able to self-regulate are far more likely to succeed in advanced academics courses (Suldo & Shaunnesy-Dedrick, 2018). Extracurricular activities, possibly community service opportunities, organized with the schedules of advanced academic students taken into consideration so that many of them are able to participate.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Advanced academics programs aim to address the needs of highly capable students and prepare them for postsecondary success. Despite efforts by College Board and IB to increase access to their course offerings, a gap remains in the participation of minority and low-income students in comparison to other demographic groups. These efforts have resulted in increased enrollment by these students, though there remains a significant discrepancy. Unfortunately, while progress has been made on the number of minority and low income students participating in advanced academic programs, increased participation typically results in decreased overall performance (Broad Foundation, 2013). This may be attributed to a student's lack of experience in advanced courses prior to high school.

The first opportunity to experience advanced coursework alongside high achieving peers comes as a result of identification as GT. Due to the reliance on parent and teacher referrals rather than universal screenings, many students who would succeed in more rigorous classes are not identified. Universal screenings on more than one occasion in elementary school along with the use of tools such as AP Potential, ACT Aspire, and analysis of PSAT scores to identify highly capable students later in their educational careers would increase participation in gifted education as well as advanced courses.

Vertical planning between high school teachers and those teaching similar contents to younger students will help better prepare students for the expectations and rigor that will be encountered in advanced courses at the secondary level. College Board's Pre-AP program and International Baccalaureate's IB Early Years, and IB Middle Years programs are examples of formal curriculums aimed at preparing students for AP and IB Diploma Programs. School districts may implement vertical teaming to address learning gaps and ensure students are exposed to crucial concepts prior to stepping into the high school classroom. Teacher collaboration beyond a single grade level allows for the establishment of foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills at an early age, increasing their chances for later academic success.

Finally, consideration of the unique social and emotional needs of advanced learners allows for the development of specific support systems. Campus systems that equip students with coping strategies and the techniques necessary to navigate through the stress of a rigorous course load in addition to the typical perils of high school. Orientation for students enrolled in advanced courses held weeks before school begins, introducing the expectations of advanced academics and providing information regarding available resources, have proven beneficial. Motivation and encouragement from adults to pursue academic goals results in students feeling positively about a campus' climate and culture, and in turn results in higher academic achievement and lower stress levels. Teachers' awareness of the importance of relationships of student academic performance and long-term aspirations will improve student self-efficacy. However, this may be more easily achieved following a school wide initiative focusing on the best approach to

forming these relationships, especially with the existing time constraints resulting from the need to cover an overwhelming number of content standards and from standardized tests.

Schools have several options for improving participation and performance in advanced academics courses, including strategic recruitment procedures paired with preparation initiatives such as summer camp style camps prior to advanced students beginning these courses, and regular opportunities to meet with counselors where obstacles may be discussed. Finally, schools should be intentional about organizing events where advanced students may come together, outside of a typical academic environment. This will promote social interaction between highly motivated students from a variety of backgrounds, encouraging the sense of belonging and positive peer interactions, all of which contribute to the likelihood an advanced student is able to overcome difficulty and ultimately succeed in an Advanced Academics Program.

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