

EDUCATION

FINANCE

AND POLICY

EFP Takeaways

Advanced Placement and Initial College Enrollment: Evidence from an Experiment

Background

Advanced Placement (AP) courses are often looked to by students who wish to increase their skills, college admissions prospects, and ability to pay for their degrees. Dylan Conger, Mark Long, and Raymond McGhee, Jr. estimate the effect of taking an AP science class on college preparedness and college going among students in schools that are relatively new to the AP program and where most of the students are low-income. Their work is published in vol. 18 issue 1 of *EFP*.

The Study

The authors used an experimental design to randomly assign the offer of enrollment into an AP science course (either AP Biology or AP Chemistry) to over 1,800 students in 23 schools across the country that had not previously offered the course. The participating schools were disproportionately located in areas with low to middle socioeconomic status and offered below the national average of AP courses.

For more details:

- View the [full issue](#).
- See the [full article in *Education Finance and Policy*](#).
- [Sign up here to receive future *EFP Takeaways*](#).
- Summary of:
Conger, D., Long, M., & McGhee, R. (2023) Advanced Placement and Initial College Enrollment: Evidence from an Experiment. *Education Finance and Policy*, 18 (1): 52-73.

Findings

The estimated impacts on college entrance exams and the probability of enrolling in a 4-year college are negligible. At the same time, the study finds that many treatment group course-takers do not take the AP exam associated with the course. Among the students who do sit for the exam, very few earn a qualifying score. In addition, taking the course may increase students' aspirations to attend higher quality postsecondary institutions, but the study finds no evidence that students initially enroll in stronger colleges.

The results suggest that taking a rigorous AP course may not translate to substantial benefits for students in schools at the frontier of AP course expansion. The exam opt-out and failure rates, in particular, suggest that many low-income students are not benefitting from the possible cost savings associated with the program.

There is no easy solution to the access/effectiveness tradeoff in the AP program or any other advanced curriculum, but there are several policies and practices that deserve further experimentation and study.

- Given that student success in an AP course hinges somewhat on prior preparation, some have suggested that the admissions criteria be strengthened to prevent weakly-prepared students from enrolling.
- Others advocate for instructional models that focus on project-based learning and inquiry-guided approaches that benefit students who often feel culturally marginalized in traditionally run science classrooms.
- Other solutions may lie in strengthening students' preparation for the exams and downplaying the importance of the exams.
- The College Board might also consider publicizing AP exam performance for students with different levels of prior preparation.