

# Criticism misses this century's biggest education success story

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Everyone hates standardized tests.

But this spring, more than [2 million](https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/2015-Annual-Participation.pdf) (<https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/2015-Annual-Participation.pdf>) high school students will choose to take optional ones. They'll voluntarily sit through a grueling three-hour exam to try to prove that they learned enough in their Advanced Placement course to earn college credit or place out of lower-level college courses.



([http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/education\\_success\\_story\\_standardized\\_tests\\_education\\_school\\_2020\\_500x293.jpg](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/education_success_story_standardized_tests_education_school_2020_500x293.jpg))

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AP has [grown](https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/2015-Annual-Participation.pdf) (<https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/2015-Annual-Participation.pdf>) dramatically over the past few decades, doubling the number of test takers between 1996 and 2006, and then doubling again by 2016. The program is run by a private company, the College Board, but it has become the default option for providing advanced coursework in public high schools across the country. As a result, over half a million more kids a year are taking more rigorous classes than were just a dozen years ago.

As the program has grown, however, it's come under fire from two very different directions. One camp of critics argues AP is expanding too [fast](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/29/education/29class.html?_r=0) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/29/education/29class.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/29/education/29class.html?_r=0)), funneling underprepared students to take classes above their level. Others argue that AP isn't expanding fast enough to provide access to [students of color and poor students](http://edtrust.org/wp-) (<http://edtrust.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2013/10/Missing\\_Students.pdf](#)) who have low rates of participation. Both of those concerns are reasonable and well-intentioned. But both are off the mark.

Critics in the first camp believe AP's rigor is being watered down to accommodate program expansion, primarily by allowing too many inadequately prepared students to participate. The most salacious among these critics call AP a "[scam](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/10/ap-classes-are-a-scam/263456/)" designed to drive profits for the College Board. Such accusations are intuitively plausible, and typically based on anecdotal evidence and critic's own experiences.

While this might be true in certain schools, it is false across the board. My [research](https://www.aei.org/publication/ap-at-scale-public-school-students-in-advanced-placement-1990-2013/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/ap-at-scale-public-school-students-in-advanced-placement-1990-2013/>) examined the test scores public school AP course-takers earned on the independent [National Assessment of Educational Progress](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard) (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>) to take a good look at AP over time.

Between 2000 and 2009, AP participation jumped 35 percent, but participants' [test scores](https://www.aei.org/publication/a-long-look-at-ap-students-in-public-schools/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/a-long-look-at-ap-students-in-public-schools/>) did not show the declines critics predicted. The test scores of graduates that did not participate in AP courses did drop during this period, slightly. That drop suggests AP has expanded by tapping deeper into a reserve of academically prepared students. Despite its limited influence on school programs, the College Board's quality control efforts, including its [AP course audits](http://www.collegeboard.com/html/apcourseaudit/) (<http://www.collegeboard.com/html/apcourseaudit/>) introduced in 2007, appear to have gained traction. Expanding at scale without sacrificing rigor is the rarest kind of success in public education, and AP is showing just that. Watering down AP may occur in some schools, but it isn't rampant.

The second camp is rightly concerned with AP participation gaps by student race and class. While AP's expansion has increased participation across race groups, the [gaps](https://public.tableau.com/profile/olivier.ballou#!/vizhome/Book2_12582/APgraduates) ([https://public.tableau.com/profile/olivier.ballou#!/vizhome/Book2\\_12582/APgraduates](https://public.tableau.com/profile/olivier.ballou#!/vizhome/Book2_12582/APgraduates)) are persistent and enormous. For instance, 7 in 10 Asian public high school graduates earned AP course credits in 2013, compared to 4 of 10 white graduates and less than 3 in 10 black graduates. Race gaps are also pronounced in how many AP courses students take. In 2009, Asian graduates with AP credit had taken an average of four different courses, compared to three courses for white graduates and fewer for Black and Hispanic graduates.

Critics complain that these gaps are due to unequal access. But the fact is that about 90 percent of public high school students attend a school that offers AP. What's more, those percentages hardly differ by students race, meaning simply expanding AP to all schools is an inadequate solution for closing race-based participation gaps. Critics also assert that these gaps stem from bias, explicit or implicit, within schools. Such bias no doubt exists in some schools, and the College Board has taken steps, like its [AP Potential program](https://appotential.collegeboard.org/app/welcome.do) (<https://appotential.collegeboard.org/app/welcome.do>), to mitigate its effects on participation for underserved students. However important it is to identify and stamp out that bias, it's insufficient to explain the racial and class gaps in AP participation.

Focusing heavily on bias risks letting the bigger culprit off the hook. Across states, schools, and subjects, large and widespread achievement gaps by race are evident from Kindergarten through graduation. Those persistent achievement gaps are comparable to AP participation gaps. Dismantling bias in AP admissions at the point students arrive in high school can only do so much while glaring achievement gaps persist through early grades. These gaps are a major failing in American education, but not in Advanced Placement.

In fact, AP might be the single happiest education story of the century. AP's dramatic growth has made it an indispensable part of public education, but the real feat has been maintaining quality at scale. AP programs have 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. The challenges and participation gaps that critics highlight remain, but they stem from the longstanding legacy of American public education, not from the rapidly expanding upstart that's improving it.

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/criticism-misses-this-centurys-biggest-education-success-story/>