

**Report to the Superintendent of Schools
on the
Advanced Topics Program
2007-08**

In the spring of 2007, the Scarsdale Board of Education endorsed the implementation of the Advanced Topics Program (AT), an approach to instruction for our most accelerated students that shifts the focus of classes from preparation for Advanced Placement (AP) exams to a curriculum that fosters “deeper and richer learning.” Following extensive community discussion and communication with the High School faculty and administration, the Board authorized the development of Advanced Topic curricula in all subject areas with specific implementation for the 2007-08 school year in Social Studies and Fine Arts. Six courses in Social Studies and two in Fine Arts formerly carrying the AP designation became Advanced Topic courses.

A year later, it is appropriate to review the progress of implementation and examine several important questions:

To what extent is the Advanced Topics Program accomplishing the goal of promoting deeper, richer learning? What have been the strengths and weaknesses of implementation?

What issues have arisen as a consequence of implementation and how have they been addressed? What lessons can be learned from the experience during the 2007-08 school year as we consider a further rollout of the program?

What does the available evidence tell us about the impact of the Advanced Topics Program on college admissions?

An examination of each of these questions should assist the Board in determining the next steps in the implementation process.

Deeper and Richer Curriculum/ The Implementation Process

The Advanced Topics Program aims to move beyond preparation for the AP examinations to provide students a rich experience that will motivate them to learn and give them deeper understanding of subject matter and skills. In particular, our continuing discussions with college and university professors underline the importance of developing higher-order thinking

(analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application of knowledge to unfamiliar situations, original and imaginative thinking). Additionally, first year college students require habits of mind that include tolerance for ambiguity, persistence in the face of difficult problems, patience, and facility in working with others to solve problems.

An appraisal of the AT transition first of all requires a sense of context. In last year's presentations to the Board of Education, faculty said that curriculum change would be evolutionary, not revolutionary. Courses that had been AP surveys in 2006-07 would remain survey courses in 2007-08. Teachers would continue to use many of the same approaches as before, including lecture and group discussion.

At the same time, there would be greater emphasis on some methods that were harder to employ when the main objective was to prepare students for AP tests. Some new activities would also be added. It was not intended that all teachers would employ exactly the same strategies or try exactly the same innovations. As they gained experience over a period of years, however, they would use what worked and discard approaches that were less effective.

In short, AT courses might give some evidence of achieving the program's long term goals in the first year of implementation. However, it was not realistic to expect broad attitudinal shifts on the part of students or significant improvements in overall learning in this short run. Presumably, such systematic gains will occur more gradually, over a period of years.

To describe the situation more specifically: prior to the implementation of AT, teachers in AP courses had committed most of their energies to preparation for the Advanced Placement exams. The result was a heavy emphasis on covering large amounts of more and less important content, as well as a focus on quizzes, tests and other activities that mimicked the kinds of exercises that would appear on AP exams. In social studies, for instance, students repeatedly practiced document based questions (DBQ's). While DBQ's can be worthwhile, they are not the only meaningful way to promote either skill development or a deep understanding of history.

Student Tom Stanley-Becker of the University of Chicago's University High School eloquently describes this focus in a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* (May 8, 2008): *"The overriding goal is to crack the AP test. That means taking a lot of practice tests--week after week, filling in those bubbles in class. It means researching past AP exams to predict what will be on the test. It means answering model AP essay questions for*

homework. It means brute memorization. My classmates ask: Will there be more questions on the American Revolution or World War I? What do we really have to know about mercantilism? Their unspoken question is: If I blow the AP test, can I still get into good college? In class, we cannot stray from the AP regimen..."

In contrast, the Advanced Topics Program would give teachers the opportunity to design instruction so that it would promote more sophisticated thinking about complex subjects. It would encourage them to ask questions such as: "How can students think more independently?" and "Can students pursue problems or questions in more persistent and creative ways?" Although members of the faculty might take somewhat differing approaches in their classes (see "Variability"), it is fair to say that, in general, AT classes would be distinguished from their AP predecessors in that they would allow for:

- Added time and opportunity to explore and debate issues of significance
- More use of an array of resources (films, podcasts, original sources) to enrich instruction
- More simulations, group work, and other active learning
- More direct experiences (trips to historical sites, libraries, museums, etc.)
- More connections of academic work with current events and the "real world"
- Enhancement of the research project in US History
- Greater emphasis on target skills and abilities in class and on assessments
- More opportunity for student initiative and creative/original thinking

We are in the process of surveying students and teachers to develop information about the impact these changes have had on student learning. This information will be available in early June, after students have completed AP exams. Meanwhile, descriptive research -- systematic teacher feedback -- suggests that the AT curricula are more effectively promoting the kinds of thinking skills and habits of mind that are the objectives of the program.

First, teachers sharply contrast more meaningful discussions that offer students the opportunity to evaluate and debate issues of significance with an approach that previously emphasized recall and recitation of facts. In US History and Government, one teacher noted that the freedom from AP exam preparation "*made room for more discussions, more interesting readings, and better tests. It also made room for*

occasional nights off from homework, which I suspect students appreciated (though AT US kids might not have any idea that these would have been impossible the year before.)"

In US History and Economics, a teacher observed that there was time to examine subject matter connections to the presidential primaries and other current events. This led students voluntarily to read magazine and newspaper articles about the emerging campaign. The shift from test preparation also gave students time to research and evaluate controversial public policy proposals (issuing a driver's license to illegal immigrants, e.g.).

According to teachers, these kinds of changes had identifiable educational benefits. For one, students found learning more interesting in itself. There was also more opportunity for them to examine the different sides of issues, assess the merits, define their own positions, and, in the case of the public policy proposals, to write a governmental agency or interest group a letter in which they advocated their positions.

Second, students in AT courses were more likely to have access to enriched resources: original source materials, films, and the like. In Advanced Topics in Western Political, Economic, and Cultural Traditions, for instance, they *"read two books of actual historical scholarship (King Leopold's Ghost and The Coming of the Third Reich) that generated some of the best discussions of the year. King Leopold, in particular, was a popular choice with the kids."* Discussions of King Leopold's Ghost prompted students to make connections between imperialism in Africa and modern-day corporate America, in which they demonstrated deep understanding of the content. They subsequently reported that they were more engaged by reading original history books than by reading a history text and unanimously recommended teaching Leopold again next year.

Another example of the value of enhanced resources: in Advanced Topics in United States History and Government, a teacher developed in-depth units, including one on the tumultuous period of the 1960s, emphasizing primary resources, a screening of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, and an analysis of detailed secondary works (Grand Expectations, by James Patterson, and Lyndon Johnson and American Liberalism, by Bruce Schulman). Students were able to grasp a deeper sense of the fear and paranoia that gripped America during the Cold War, as well as of the challenges that led to the Great Society.

A member of the Social Studies faculty who teaches Advanced Topics in American Government and Politics with Economics offers the following

description of the enriched resources and active learning experiences in his class:

"In economics, the AT/AP differences in my course were that I had students read Malcolm Gladwell's Tipping Point, organized a balanced budget simulation, and a major unit on personal finance, the stock market, and corporate ethics in the time I would normally have felt obligated to devote to in-class AP testing and review. I also (and this is as much the product of what year it was, and the students' own natural curiosity) was able to devote considerably greater time to discussing, explaining, and exploring the 2008 campaign with my econ class without having to worry about the 'AP test prep clock.' The final exam also represented (at least for me) a dramatic departure from any assessment I have ever given in an economics class. In the past, my springtime exams were exclusively old AP tests. This year's final required more reflection and analysis, and in my view was a vast improvement."

An art history teacher similarly describes the importance of active learning experiences that would have been less likely to occur under the pressure of a looming AP exam: "Once a month students had the opportunity to teach/share anything they had experienced during summer programs, travel, or research with the rest of the class. Not only did students gain experience with public speaking, they also connected with their peers in a positive way. I think the students appreciated their class more when they were allowed to take an active part in their learning."

Active learning can take many forms:

"Students assessed everything they accomplished in their Visual Research Journal (VRJ). They reviewed the quarter's homework assignments and wrote about what they did each week in their journals. They also reflected on their class work as it progressed and when it was completed. Students discussed their concentrations and class work with a partner as well. The following assessment strategy is representative of that process. After the first assignment (to create a 24"x36" graphite stick and/or charcoal drawing inspired by on a random magazine image) was finished, Advanced Topics students asked five questions about their art. Then they reflected on the assignment and wrote down any feeling they had, positive or negative, during the process. Next, they had to imagine that they were no longer the student, but had switched roles and were now the teacher. As the teacher, they had to respond to what they had just written and give themselves advice and a grade."

Direct learning experiences were also important. When students visited the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, according to their teacher, *"they were asked essential questions.... 'What is it you are seeing?' 'What is its context?' 'What does it connect to?'"* At least one student described the experience as the 'most intellectually stimulating activity' he'd had during his time at the high school. Students came away with a more conceptual and thematic understanding of the content than they would have, given an AP approach that carried heavy recall emphasis, the teacher said.

As a number of the preceding comments have suggested, AT classes were more likely than AP classes to involve exploration of the connections between course content and relevant "real world" developments such as the presidential campaign. As one teacher reported:

"What is different is that there is a much closer examination of the current economic issues facing the U.S. economy. This year I did several lessons on the nature of the U.S. mortgage markets and the sub-prime crisis. I also had a whole simulation that involved students in role playing various members of the President's Council of Economic Advisors. I also spent more time looking at globalization issues and how they are impacting the U.S. economy. Specifically, I looked at how the value of the dollar was helping U.S. exports while also worsening the U.S. trade deficit."

And as another earlier comment suggests, AT classes also afforded more time for original research. In U.S History, for example, time for original research had previously been extremely limited. One of the school librarians recently observed that the allocation of time for a substantive research project has not only given students an opportunity to continue to develop skills that will be important in college, but it also resulted in a great number of "exemplary" papers. A US History teacher reports: *"I used to put books on reserve because we did not have the time for the students to locate their sources. They are making connections and are very excited about their self-selected and self-developed topics. The students spend a week in the library, one-on-one with the librarians and me to develop topics and dig for resources. The process is the focus."*

In some cases, teachers configured AT courses to concentrate very explicitly on higher order thinking skills. The teacher of Advanced Topics in Art History noted, for example, that she was able to place *"(m)ore emphasis on critical thinking: for example the contemporary art assignment that students completed at the Guggenheim Museum related to the exhibition by Cai Guo-Qiang, and entailed locating a review of the exhibition before we saw it and noting the critic's assessment of the show.*

While we were at the museum, students were asked to respond to the critic's commentary, with references to specific pieces on display, and then write their own review of the exhibit as if it were to be read by people who had not yet seen the show.

More emphasis on essential questions: for example, when studying Egyptian art, each student was assigned an object in the Metropolitan's collection and after locating pertinent information about it from the website and/or the textbook, students were asked to define a new "essential question." As historians, what else do we need to know, or would we want to know about the artifact? Questions might perhaps relate to the media ('Have we seen ivory used in comparable objects?' 'Did they serve a similar purpose?') or iconography ('Is the goddess always shown with her attributes?' 'What foods are represented as offerings?' 'Do we see the same foods in other images or carvings?')

More emphasis on context: for example, at the Cloisters students were given an object to study before we went to the museum, asked to read what was on the website or in the text about the specific object, and then, while in the galleries, to note and write about what they learned anew based on identifying, describing and discussing the objects displayed nearby. Were the objects nearby similar in subject matter? Media? Style? Time period? Students were asked to consider the curator's perspectives and rationale for grouping the objects together and how the context of the installation helps us to appreciate and understand meaning.

More emphasis on visual analysis: In class, and in museum assignments, students were often asked to describe and discuss objects that were unfamiliar, the intent being to sharpen their perceptual skills. Careful guided looking, based on VTS (visual thinking strategies) used by museum educators, was encouraged so that students would learn to discern the nuances of style and content in art objects. Using VTS, students learned to trust and value their own observations about, style, subject and meaning, and to relate them to historical knowledge acquired in class.

The teacher of Advanced Topics in Studio Arts described the following opportunities for original thinking and creativity:

Visual Research Journal – The VRJ is a process journal, but much, much more. The visual research journal is a vital tool that helps develop creative thinking and problem solving, as well as help students reflect on the nature of art, artists, and personal philosophies. In the VRJ, students visually document projects as they progress and reflect on their outcomes. Last

year, AP students kept only process journals which were mostly for working on ideas for projects and creating unique exploratory images. I think this year students benefited not just from creating works of art in their journals; the book became part of their thinking process.

Locker Installations – This new project was inspired by a flyer from Virginia Commonwealth University. Students created personal installations in locker spaces in the school. For this project, students had two choices: they created either a mini-gallery in their locker (The gallery show could be about anything. For example, it could be their own art work miniaturized or it could be their mentor artist's work), or they could create an installation based on any theme (such as their concentration) and out of any materials. We had a public opening on December 14th .

Three-dimensional projects – This year students were able to solve their visual problems in either 2-D or 3-D instead of just 2-D. Students felt comfortable being able to problem- solve “outside the box,” so to speak. They were not limited by materials or ideas. For example, students were able to embrace the “green initiative” by creating sculptures from recyclable materials such as water bottles.”

Innovation inevitably implies some less successful efforts. To provide a sense of context, a Government and Economics teacher offers the following perspective on a curriculum that evolves over time:

”As to the ‘what would you not do in the future’ question, while all courses are always and obviously works in progress, there truly is no subject I covered, no assessment I gave, nothing I did curriculum-wise (in either Government or Econ) that upon reflection I regretted.

That (obviously) is not because I am particularly brilliant. Rather I think it's because I had long experience teaching both courses, and it's because of all the summer '07 planning that we devoted (individually, in pairs, and in small groups) to the AT courses before we ever taught them. And it is also because we approached this transition surgically. We did not gut these courses wholesale but rather kept what was best, and began, freed from the constraints imposed by the College Board, to imagine and introduce new ideas and approaches with the understanding that for most of us this would be the first year of a multi-year process and that while the course would represent a noticeable departure/improvement even in year one, it would only improve as the years went on. In short, these are not entirely new courses; they are improved and improving.

I have always found (in AP, AT or elsewhere) that absent some kind of

dramatic "oh my gosh - THAT didn't work!" backfire moment-- the "wouldn't do it again" stuff-- disappears from a course gradually; that as one imagines and develops a new, creative idea for a lesson or a unit and gets excited about that idea, one must necessarily, because class time is finite and a full curriculum must still be covered, remove or abbreviate some other feature of the course or eliminate the old-style way of teaching that same unit."

While evolutionary program change makes serious missteps unlikely, experience with any new program does point up problems and lead teachers to make adjustments. For example, a faculty member reflects on his work in U.S. History: *"Of course there were individual lessons that did not work out as well as I would have hoped and that will be revised. A couple of primary readings were less successful in eliciting good discussion, and I'll be rethinking assigning them. These are the inevitable consequences of curricular change, and a good reason why teachers need to have at a course for a couple or three years.*

On a larger level, in both AT classes I tried to incorporate current events into preparation for the final project of the year. This worked less well than I would have wished, and I am seriously considering abandoning the effort for next year. It was difficult to ask students to focus on a single topic without a broader knowledge base of current problems, and though I like the idea of news analysis essays, it was difficult for students--and for me--to keep up with them on top of our other work."

Similarly, reviewing her work in Art History, the teacher notes: *"I am not sure if it was this year's crop of students or the nature of the course (although we followed the same chronology, and museum trips were scheduled at the same times as the AP), but students were confused about dates. Given the nature of the field trip schedule, we do have to study some works in the museums out of sequence (Rococo at the Frick in December, while in class we are working on Medieval), but by the end of the course students most often see how the chronological periods "fit." But next year, I will give a more complete timeline and review it more frequently.*

Also, since this is a college level course, students are told on the first day that they are expected to keep up with the assigned readings, and the more diligent students clearly do, but others were lax, and this was evident in class discussions. Since they are still adolescents and some need more "prodding," I will give more quizzes to encourage more consistent and conscientious study habits."

Finally, a teacher of economics offers this perspective: *“What I would do differently is include more electoral politics in the course. While I did have lessons that were policy related, looking at the 2008-2009 school year I would have an even greater emphasis on the economics issues of the presidential election. Also, I am looking to beef up the microeconomics components of the class. Heretofore, the course has been heavily macro economics in its emphasis, and I would like to have an even greater presence of microeconomics in the course.”*

On balance, faculty members have concluded that the Advanced Topics Program has changed instruction for the better. We have learned important lessons that can be considered in a future rollout, but the benefits of the program are real and meaningful, in the view of the professional staff.

Implementation Process

At the Board's direction, the superintendent constituted two committees consisting of teachers, administrators and parents. The first, the College Information Task Force, has worked closely with the Counseling Department, in particular, to clarify for colleges and universities our transition to Advanced Topics courses. This work involved refinement of our student profile and transcript and continuing conversation throughout the year with admissions office representatives. In addition, the Committee met to review mid-year data on early admissions and again to examine complete data on the success of students in the college application process.

The Committee concluded that we have satisfactorily communicated to colleges the nature of our most accelerated program. We will continue to educate additional schools to which our students may apply in the future and to ensure that new college admissions officers become familiar with our program. The Committee has also recently recommended the development of a Frequently Asked Questions document about Advanced Topics and the college process. This document will address specific questions about the most accelerated course designations on the Common Application and the role of weighting grades in the college admissions process, as well as general information about our efforts to inform colleges about the AT Program.

The superintendent charged the second committee, the Validation Committee, with gathering data to address the following criteria:

1. Early and regular college acceptance rates compared with the

- past five- years;
2. Responses from college admissions officers;
 3. Responses from visiting professors;
 4. Five-year cohort survey re: readiness for college work and college credit

The Validation Committee met several times over the year and addressed each of these criteria (See Appendix). I

As I noted above, early college acceptance data were available at mid-year, and regular admissions data have become available more recently, following April. The committee did not feel a need to survey college admissions officers. It reviewed information from visiting professors. It initiated the first phase of the five year cohort study.

In addition, the Committee recommended and developed a survey for current students to gather information about their perspectives on the Advanced Topics experience. This survey will be administered following the completion of all AP examinations, when students have as full a perspective on the year's experience as possible.

The Committee was also interested in the results of AP tests, which will not be available until the summer.

The Committee was further charged with raising relevant issues and making suggestions for faculty consideration and action. Four main issues emerged: AP test performance, AP credit, variability among sections of the same course and stress. I address these below.

Some individuals on the Committee also had specific suggestions or concerns with regard to these topics. One parent strongly advocated syllabi that offer a "roadmap" for students over the course of the two semesters and that include major assignments and learning goals. She suggested that department chairs facilitate the development of such syllabi and monitor their adherence to the common course outlines in courses with multiple sections.

In addition, Committee members recommended department chair oversight of the communication of information about AP exams and the preparatory sessions that lead up to their administration. Teacher e-boards could be an appropriate vehicle for posting such information for student and parental review.

Another parent member of the Committee suggested that a precipitous decline in AP exam scores would be a cause for concern. The AP scores in the various subject areas will be data for us to consider when we receive them this summer. We will examine them with interest. If there has been a significant shift in results, and if that shift does appear to be meaningful, we will certainly consider implications for program, instruction, and test preparation.

While its mandate did not ask the Validation Committee for a recommendation on the future of Advanced Topics, its members did feel comfortable supporting a continued, deliberate, rollout of the program. In the process of our discussions, one parent member noted that while she personally believed it is appropriate to continue to move forward, some other parents would prefer no further expansion until more data are available. That is very likely accurate.

I turn now to an analysis of the issues and to a recommendation.

College Acceptance -- In the most competitive college admission year in history, we cannot claim any net gain as a result of Advanced Topics courses. On the other hand, and at the worst, AT – and, more specifically, our approach to reporting AT and AP courses on student transcripts -- appears to have done no harm to our college admissions.

The evidence that emerged at mid-year when early action/early decision results came in showed a virtually identical rate of early admission as last year, our highest year of early admission over the last decade. While final college acceptance rates are still in flux at this point as a result of several selective schools now going to wait lists, we can safely conclude that the data demonstrate that Scarsdale High School students have had a very successful year in terms of admissions, particularly at the nation's most selective colleges and universities. (See Appendix).

The College Information and Validation Committees unanimously agree that because of the many variables in colleges' applicant pools and within our own pool of seniors, both annually and year-to-year, no single factor can clearly account for annual changes in the pattern of our students' admission. If it is possible to identify cause and effect at all, a longer period of time (e.g., five years) will be required for analysis.

College Admissions Officers – Last year, the professional staff informed the Board of Education that college admissions officers were positive to enthusiastic about Scarsdale's proposal to shift from an AP to an AT curriculum. Officials told us that students who took the most challenging

courses available, whether AP or AT, would be treated equally in admission. Further, they said that Scarsdale is well-known in admissions circles and that the quality of our students' preparation is another reason their applications would continue to be viewed favorably.

We did not anticipate the detailed level of public scrutiny that followed this assessment of the situation. We had made a "best judgment" about the available information, considering information from a written survey, phone calls and personal contacts, as well as our long experience with the college admissions process and our relationships with many admissions officers. This was not and was not intended to be a precise statistical analysis or a detailed description of every response we received in our surveys of officials' views.

In retrospect, we might at the start have been precise about the data that led to our view. While the overwhelming majority of colleges, including Chicago, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania and others were supportive of our efforts, a literal handful of those we contacted had concerns. When we explained what we were trying to accomplish, those with reservations revised their views.

At the time, some in our community felt we were not describing the situation accurately. Their concerns notwithstanding, the vast preponderance of evidence was and is as we said. During this first year of AT implementation, actual college admissions experience speaks largely for itself. We've not formally surveyed college admissions officers a second time, as they would almost certainly tell us the same things they told us last year.

Our counseling staff has been in contact with college admissions staff at national meetings and in the process of working on this year's admissions. College officials continue to indicate that the shift to AT makes no difference in their deliberations or have commended us on the move toward a deeper curriculum that will prepare students adequately for college success. If anything, a number of admissions officers have expressed surprise that we still offer some AP courses and that we're not moving faster to AT.

University contacts—All departments are now engaged in an ongoing cycle of discussions with visiting professors. As a result of our exchanges within the Validation Committee, we have developed protocols for these conversations (see Appendix) in which professors are asked to comment on college expectations, course goals and content, assessments, and the quality of student work. We will be completing the first round of the first

annual cycle of visits and discussions during June, and at that time we will review the results formally.

Each department has benefited from the comments of university professors. All university teachers endorsed our goal of a deeper curriculum for our students, and each has offered insights about their expectations for college freshmen. In some cases, professors have challenged conventional thought about content coverage in particular disciplines and made suggestions for paring the curriculum to promote the important habits of thinking that they cite as critical for students entering college. In general, there has been wide praise for the instructional practices that characterize Scarsdale High School, especially in terms of our redefined approach for our most accelerated students.

The Visiting Professor component of the Advanced Topics Program, as I reported to the Board in January, has been one of the unanticipated dividends of implementation. Our teachers are speaking regularly with those who will be our students' instructors in coming years, and that dialogue has served to enhance and validate our approach to learning and to offer opportunities for reflection and refinement. The benefits will accrue not only to those enrolled in AT classes, but to all students.

Cohort Survey—Thus far, we have conducted surveys of the Class of 2006 and the Class of 2007 regarding the use of AP scores for credit or advanced standing (See Appendix). Although necessarily limited in scope, the data do suggest that scores are used for credit and advanced standing. At the same time, our graduates also describe other vehicles for exemption from college requirements such as placement exams, instructor or department head permission, and SAT subject scores. It must be noted that the response rate to the survey has not been especially high, with only about 70 students from each class replying.

In sum, we have compiled much of the data to address the four criteria set forth in the committees' mandates. The remainder will become available as soon as it is appropriate or possible to gather it.

The Validation Committee was also charged with identifying issues or concerns that should be considered and addressed by the professional staff. Four topics of interest emerged.

Credentialing through Exam Scores

There has been some anxiety about how well our students would perform on the AP examinations scheduled for May. In this connection, we may

recall the March meeting at which a parent stated that the school has the “twin goals” of providing students a deeper, richer education and maintaining strong AP scores. And as I suggested earlier, one of our Validating Committee members has expressed his opinion that if AP scores were to decline significantly, parents would want the entire AT initiative reconsidered.

It is important to recall that when the faculty first presented the AT concept to the Board of Education, the rationale was to free teachers and students from the need to focus on the AP test and test scores. It was never our intention to make AP scores a goal or a criterion by which the success of AT courses might be judged. It was further our understanding that the Board of Education did not predicate the implementation of the Advanced Topics Program on the maintenance of comparable AP exam scores.

It is true that faculty believed – and continue to believe -- that students will to perform well on examinations that they elect to take. We have suggested it is even possible that performance will be enhanced by virtue of the different and more thorough understanding of issues in each discipline where the AT Program is being implemented. Our history with AP exams is that we have strong record of performance, that the cadre of teachers who have prepared students well in the past is on the whole the same group currently teaching AT courses, and that preparation sessions prior to the exams are preparing students as they always have.

The faculty has also agreed that if there were to be a significant decline in scores, we would naturally want to examine that phenomenon and determine its implications for instruction. However, it is important to recognize that a change in scores would not necessarily signal a decline in the quality of curriculum, teaching or student learning.

First, of course, it is possible that AP tests might not do a particularly good job of evaluating the skills, abilities and knowledge we teach in AT and that are important in college. Beyond this educational reality, however, several possible scenarios suggest why year-to-year score comparisons may turn out to be invalid from a psychometric standpoint.

According to one scenario discussed by the Validation Committee, for instance, most of our highest performing students will continue to take AP exams, while a number of our lower performing students (and I use this term advisedly – we’re talking about excellent performers in one of the highest performing schools in the nation) will elect not to. As this possible future plays out, scores should actually rise, since a lower-performing

portion of our population won't take the tests. In that case, a scoring gain won't tell us that student test performance has improved, since the cohorts won't be comparable, year-to-year.

A second scenario is the reverse of the first. Many of our highest performing students won't take AP exams, since they will be attending Ivy or Ivy-like colleges that won't allow them to use AP scores to place out of introductory courses. Contrarily, many students who aren't at the top will continue to take AP exams because they will be able to use the scores in college. In this case, scores may decline, but year-to-year comparisons again won't be meaningful because the cohorts won't be comparable.

A third scenario involves test-taking cohorts that look the same, year-to-year, but that actually aren't. Recently, some AT teachers have begun to hear that some students are taking the AP exams only because their parents want them to, and that they (the students) don't care what scores they get. One line of reasoning: "I've been admitted to college and I'm tired of twelve years of academic pressure. I don't particularly want to place out of courses next year. In fact, I'd rather take introductory classes where I've got a better chance of doing well, since I'll already have studied the material in high school." If it turns out that any significant number of AP-takers isn't motivated to prepare for or to take the exams, then year-to-year cohort comparisons will again be problematic.

As I noted earlier, the faculty and I are interested in the AP score results and will consider them with care. At the same time, the Board approved the AT Program because of its potential to improve student learning in fundamental ways. Given reasonable evidence that the program is moving toward this goal, a possible test score decline should not translate automatically into a decision to back away from AT. To the contrary, if lower test scores became a concern, we would presumably consider strategies to address the situation without compromising AT. In other words, AP scores were not the goal of the Advanced Topics Program and they should not determine its future.

AP Credit and Advanced Standing

Last year, we noted that credit and advanced standing policies vary widely among and within colleges and universities. Because of this variety, we believed it was advisable to allow students and their parents to make choices about which AP exams to take. We stated at the time that we would offer review sessions for those students who wished to take

advantage of these tests, that there were alternative ways of securing credit or advanced standing.

We have gathered data on the use of AP scores for college credit from graduates of the Class of 2006 and 2007. These confirm that a number of students do, in fact, use AP results for credit and advanced standing (See Appendix). A parent group with which I met this month has suggested that counselors might help students make more educated choices about the possibilities for the use of AP credit, advanced standing, or special learning opportunities. For example, a student who has elected not to take an examination might benefit from an AP score for reasons not contemplated while he or she is in high school. A conversation with the dean could open students to the merits of taking examinations that they and their parents may wish to consider.

The Board of Education endorsed the AT Program with the understanding that we would permit all students to take AP exams and in fact prepare them for that experience. I view the question of the various uses of the scores as not particularly germane to the decision whether to move forward with implementation.

"Variability" in Instruction

This issue has been at the center of much discussion. Difference among teachers is inherent in the educational process; it is not unique to the Advanced Topics program, nor can AT be considered the reason it exists in Scarsdale. As we have implemented the first phase of the AT program, however, variability has arisen as an issue that we can and ought to address.

First, the expressed concerns seem to coalesce around certain perceptions:

Courses with multiple sections lack an adequate core curriculum and/or students and parents are not adequately aware of the curriculum
Some teachers focus on some topics at the expense of "core" knowledge coverage;

Some teachers become overly involved in "tangents";

Some classes or teachers are less engaging than they might be;

Some teachers are harder than others;

Field trips pull students out of class;

Field trips may be fun but are not worthwhile.

To begin, a driving principle behind Advanced Topics was that students

are most likely to be inspired when strong teachers have latitude to translate their professional interests and passions into learning experiences for their students. Consistent with this premise, there have been and will be desirable differences in style, pedagogy, and assessment practices in Advanced Topics courses as there are in all courses that have multiple teachers. We have confidence in the knowledge and professionalism of our teachers, as well as in their individual capacity to provide students with those unusual and creative experiences that make for a quality education.

At the same time, faculty are responsible for teaching a common core of knowledge and skills that will prepare students for the challenges they will face upon graduation. Department chairs are meanwhile responsible for conferring with teachers if in any specific instance there seems to be disproportionate emphasis on one area or topic, or if content core is not being given adequate attention. More broadly, good schools are always in a process of fine-tuning the balance between an appropriate amount of consistency and an appropriate amount of individuality and creativity.

With regard to the first four concerns, faculty worked last summer and this year to develop a curriculum core and common assessments for which they are accountable. Validation Committee discussions have been helpful in pointing out where students and parents were less than clear about course content and objectives, and we have made and are making a number of adjustments in response.

To be more specific about steps we have already taken to provide consistency (what we have come to call an "assured experience") for every student in any course that has multiple sections:

- Teachers of the same course have a history of working together to coordinate their approaches.
- There is a statement of skills and "big ideas" that are to be taught in each course
- A common course outline gives teachers of the same subject a template to follow in crafting individual syllabi.
- Teachers have now distributed syllabi to all students
- Department chairs and building administrators visit classes and monitor progress, consistent with course outlines and syllabi
- Departmental discussions and exchanges with visiting professors help to develop common understandings and approaches
- Common final assessments will hold students and teachers accountable for common outcomes. These will be graded blind

and results will be evaluated by department chairs and teachers. Visiting professors will help assure assessments are of high quality.

The several added suggestions and comments of Validation Committee members are helpful in regard to the assured experience, and I believe they will be useful to us as we go forward.

With regard to questions of instructional quality (variations in the difficulty of different classes or variances in the level of student enthusiasm or engagement) I am confident, as I noted earlier, in our teachers' knowledge and level of skill. Our professional staff is well-educated. They understand their subjects and are interested in their students. They are capable and prepare their students well.

At the same time, as we all know from our experiences in school and college, it is a fact of life that all teachers aren't equally inspiring. To complicate matters, different students can find different teachers motivating. While many of us resonate to memories of some powerful, dynamic classroom presence, there is also a place for the teacher who is caring, methodical, perhaps less dramatic in style, but nonetheless effective at transmitting skills and knowledge. Often, students come to value the patience and insight of such a teacher more in retrospect, with the passage of time.

When individual teacher performance does vary more significantly from an acceptable norm, as I noted earlier, department chairs and building administrators are responsible for addressing the situation. If one teacher appears to be assigning disproportionate amounts of work or another evidently does little to employ more engaging methods, the student or his or her parent should speak to the teacher or a counselor. Unresolved concerns should be shared with the department chair and then with the principal.

More broadly, however, a main reason we proposed the Advanced Topics program is that we wanted to engage students more in learning and to make education more meaningful for them. That prompts the question: How are we most likely to foster the kind of teachers and promote the kind of teaching that will achieve this goal? By asking teachers to cover large amounts of more and less important content under the pressure of a high-stakes test? Or are we more likely to see teachers develop interesting lessons and try promising new approaches if they have opportunities to build on their own strengths, explore what they love, and share experiences with equally involved colleagues?

Under the auspices of AT, the work of the Validation Committee and related discussions within the departments have encouraged teachers to share more of best practices and to identify common activities for teachers and students.

As to field experiences, there is a more generic and a more specific set of concerns. Generically, one may argue that field experiences are inherently less valuable than in-class instruction. This proposition assumes that more can always be learned from textbooks and class discussions in school than from direct encounters with scholars or resources elsewhere. This position would seem to be untenable.

More specifically, students went on several trips this year. Some, such as the experiences at Philipse Manor or Hyde Park, took students to relatively nearby museums, libraries, and similar institutions to work with or hear from scholars or historical interpreters. Others, such as the trip to the Kennedy Library, were longer in duration and involved an overnight stay.

A criticism of the Philipse Manor trip was that students had already visited the site in elementary school. Some parents said their children criticized the Hyde Park visit as “not that interesting.” The Boston trip was criticized because students went out to dinner and attended a movie at night, as if it were all fun and therefore not worthwhile.

In response, one might note that taking two trips to the same place is not unlike reading the same book at two different ages, an exercise that can be valuable if one takes the time to appreciate the similarities and the differences. The teacher’s assessment of the Kennedy Library experience has already been noted (above). It is in the nature of overnight trips for students to dine out.

While some of the particular criticisms this year may seem less valid than others, it is entirely possible that the quality of field experiences could be improved. We may also benefit from a review of the number of field experiences and missed classes any particular student is likely to encounter. These kinds of adjustments are ones we have to make all the time, both in and out of class, and they are certainly not unique to Advanced Topics courses.

In sum, we are all concerned about unhealthy variability in curriculum and instruction. It is appropriate for the school to take reasonable steps to assure enough consistency, which it is doing. At the same time, Advanced Topics does not cause course variability; to the contrary,

evidence suggests that Advanced Topics discussions have helped us to work toward a better balance between consistency and individuality in our college level courses. This being the case, concerns about variability should not impede the further development of the AT Program.

Stress

Some have suggested that the burden of preparing for AP exams layered on to the richer, deeper curriculum of AT courses adds additional stress for Advanced Topics students. Has the Advanced Topics Program created more stress than before and is any stress which has accrued counterproductive?

It is possible that some students feel added stress due to preparation for AP exams. At the same time, students who elect to take fewer tests are doubtless experiencing less stress than they otherwise might have. If there is such a thing as "net stress," therefore, overall levels may be lower this year because fewer students are taking as many AP exams.

On balance, the question of additional stress does not appear to have emerged to any great degree among students enrolled in Advanced Topics courses, and to the extent that heightened anxiety does exist, it seems to have been concentrated among Advanced Topics American History students who were taking their very first AP exams. Juniors have always displayed more concern during the spring of the year.

In general, deans and teachers are not hearing any great number of student statements about additional pressure as a consequence of the Advanced Topics curriculum. Similarly, we have not heard any large number of complaints about additional stress from the parent community.

In individual cases, stress may be both externally-derived and self-imposed: different students experience different levels of stress, depending on factors that include workload, family pressures, and their own personalities. Further, parents may hear anxieties about school when, in fact, their children are actually handling those anxieties quite well.

Where counselors have become aware of individual concerns this year, they have spoken with the student and, as appropriate, with parents. Typically, those involved have been "Type A" personalities who place a great deal of pressure on themselves (or on their children). Given what counselors know about the personal histories of these individuals, they say it is not unreasonable to think that the majority, if not all, of them would

probably have been describing much the same feelings with or without AT.

With all that said, it may well be impossible to determine what impact AT and AP prep are having on student stress. First of all, assessments of stress levels are to some degree idiosyncratic. Second, stress is an ever-present fact of life in Scarsdale. Objectively, has it increased? Students are doing added AP test prep now, but they have done added AP test prep for years. Has pressure increased incrementally? How could one quantify an answer? Subjectively, are students feeling more stressed? Any one person has a limited capacity to absorb stress; beyond a certain point, more external stressors cannot add to the pressure he or she feels.

Again, the student survey proposed by the Validation Committee will be given after the AP exam cycle has been completed. This will provide more concrete data about stress. At this point, however, we can say that in the judgment of counselors, department heads, and individual teachers, increased levels of stress do not appear to be a byproduct of the Advanced Topics curricula. Certainly, we have no objective data to indicate that such a phenomenon exists.

It should also be noted that the SHS Compact Committee has recently embarked on a systematic study of overall stress levels and their causes among all Scarsdale students, an effort that will continue into the coming year.

Recommendation

Based on the experiences reported by Advanced Topics teachers, on the analysis of issues that have been raised regarding credentialing, the use of AP scores for credit and/or advancement, variability and stress, and the modifications to the program that have been suggested by both faculty-parent committees, I recommend that we continue with the rollout of the Advanced Topics Program in the 2008-09 school year. Specifically, I recommend the replacement of five current AP courses: senior English, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, and Music Theory. The relevant departments have made significant advances in preparation for implementation, including the contributions of college professors, and will work over the summer to refine the course outlines of Advanced Topics courses in those subject areas. This rollout would provide more students with a deeper, richer education. It appears justified by the evidence available to us.

The remaining departments, Mathematics and World Language, should

defer Advanced Topics implementation until the 2009-10 academic year. While the Math Department has been relatively satisfied with the AP exam approach, those teachers are in conversation with university personnel who have somewhat different thoughts about how best to prepare students for the study of Calculus and Statistics. The World Languages Department, which has also met with university professors, has been in a period of transition in departmental leadership over the past year. As a consequence, Advanced Topics curriculum development could benefit from another year of study under a new department chair.

Our experience in enhancing instruction through the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills, more meaningful classroom activities, and a focus on the complexity of skills that teach students to function as "historians" (either in the social sciences or in the fine arts) and reflective and working artists, confirms the value of an approach to learning that has improved instruction for our students and is improving student learning. With the commitment to continuing our analysis of data from all quarters and a dedication to developing and refining curricula in additional disciplines, we can and should move further toward a distinctive and richer curriculum through the continued implementation of the Advanced Topics Program.