

WESTTOWN SCHOOL AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT
Frequently Asked Questions

As of the 2007-08 school year, Westtown School no longer uses the designation of "Advanced Placement" (AP) in course titles. Each academic department has identified particular courses as "Advanced" and course titles reflect this designation in the school's course program guide and on student's transcripts. In making this change, Westtown has joined a growing cohort of independent schools which have ended the use of the AP designation.

What are some of the schools that have already stopped using the AP designation?

Calhoun School (NY), Concord Academy (MA), Dalton School (NY), Doane Stuart School (NY), Fieldston School (NY), Friends Central School (PA), Friends Select School (PA), Germantown Friends School (PA), Haverford School (PA), The Hill School (PA), Lawrenceville School (PA), Oldfields School (MD), Philips Exeter Academy (NH), Providence Academy (MN), St. Andrew's Sewanee School (TN), St. Paul's School (NH), University of Illinois Laboratory School (IL), and University Preparatory Academy (WA).

Is AP disappearing from American secondary education?

No, in fact the number and diversity of students taking AP courses and exams nation wide is growing. The increase comes from the growth of Pre-AP and AP curriculum in the public sector, particularly in high schools serving disadvantaged students. College Board's 21st century mission for the AP program is to inspire and prepare disadvantaged students for college and increase the percentage of students going to college from school districts with many low income and "first generation students" (first in their family to attend college). More students will be taking AP courses and exams in the years to come, but the composition of this group will change radically. The AP program is shifting away from its original mission of providing high-powered students in college preparatory schools with an elite advanced curriculum. This is an important and positive change which has the potential of benefiting many children in this country whose schools do not currently prepare them adequately for college. It is causing, however, schools in both the private and public sector with a reputation for excellent curriculum and instruction to reevaluate their relationship with the AP program.

What is Westtown School's policy with regard to AP classes?

After several years of research involving colleges and peer schools, Westtown's faculty agreed that the time had come to stop using the AP designation in course titles. Some departments are continuing to teach advanced courses that resemble (in varying degrees) the AP curriculum while others have designed advanced level course work which goes beyond the AP curriculum in depth and breadth. Teachers believe that in a few subject areas, AP curriculum is still good preparation for college study; in other subject areas, it

believed to be restrictive and outdated. Students who wish to take AP exams which are an appropriate match for course work at Westtown will receive guidance from teachers and the college counselors concerning colleges' credit policies, preparation for the content and format of the exams, and exam registration. AP exams will continue to be offered at Westtown during the national exam period in early May.

What are AP (Advanced Placement) courses, anyway?

Since 1955, the College Board (the parent organization of the SAT) has made college preparatory course curriculum available to high schools. Since that time, many high school students have prepared for college and earned college credit by taking AP courses and excelling on AP exams. In recent years, the mission of the AP program has changed as College Board has made a commitment to help the nation's disadvantaged schools upgrade the quality of curriculum and instruction. College Board believes that AP can provide important support and resources to schools whose students are underprepared for college and employment.

What are Advanced Placement examinations?

AP examinations are standardized, national tests administered in high schools (usually at the conclusion of a course that has followed a prescribed curriculum) which allow a student to demonstrate his/her proficiency in a variety of academic subjects. Currently, 39 subject area AP exams are available, with more being introduced each year. Each examination is scored by College Board on a scale of 1 – 5. Historically, students earning scores of 3, 4 or 5 were awarded some amount of college credit and/or placement into higher level courses. Colleges have become increasingly reluctant to offer college credit for course work completed in high school, particularly highly selective colleges. College professors have studied the AP exams carefully in light of their own curriculum and teaching practices; many do not believe that AP curriculum prepares students adequately for college level study, particularly at a high level. In fact, studies at some colleges have shown that students who use AP credit to skip entry level courses are at risk to struggle later in their academic careers.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of AP?

Initially, college credit and/or placement in upper level courses were the reward for taking AP courses and scoring well on the exams. This remains true in many public and less-selective private universities. While AP exams were never considered college admission tests, most colleges came to recognize the rigor of AP course work and high AP exam scores, giving students an advantage in the admission process if their transcript included AP course work. Over time, the public came to link the quality of a school (and that of a particular student) with the presence of AP course work.

Over the past decade, an educational reform movement of university professors and secondary school educators has called into question the purpose and value of AP course

work as well as other high school based college-level course work. Many educators have come to believe that the disadvantages of AP outweigh the benefits.

By its very nature, an AP course teaches to a test; many college professors believe that this experience is far from equivalent to college course work and disadvantages students who accelerate their college studies. A compelling reason for Westtown's decision is that test-driven standards limit the ability of good high school teachers to develop curriculum that engage top students in critical thinking and research. AP courses are valuable in that they define a standard of quality for curriculum and instruction - this is of great value in schools with limited resources and uneven classroom instruction. Simply put, Westtown is blessed with good teachers and ample resources and believes that it can do better. It is our responsibility to offer our students the best educational opportunities as well as the best preparation possible as they face the challenges of college admission and the college experience.

What will Westtown School offer in lieu of courses with the AP designation?

During a three year curriculum study, a multi-disciplinary committee of Westtown faculty members researched this issue in depth and both visited and surveyed colleges and peer schools. Each academic department at Westtown examined its course offerings in light of how our strongest students were being challenged. In 2006-07, departments brought forward for consideration their design for advanced course work in their discipline. The outcome is that some departments will continue to teach advanced coursework that resembles an enriched AP curriculum. Other departments have thoughtfully designed advanced courses that go well beyond the AP curriculum in breadth and depth. Advanced course work will continue to challenge our students and nurture the intellectual inquisitiveness, critical thinking, cultural awareness, moral sensitivity and personal integrity that characterize a Westtown education and make our students highly attractive to colleges.

Examples of advanced course work being offered in 2008-09 (see the Upper School Curriculum Guide for full listings by department): The Holocaust and Genocide, Linear Algebra, Evolutionary History of Life on Earth, Research Ecology, Chemistry.

Will students still be able to take an AP exam?

Westtown School will continue to offer students the opportunity to take AP exams. Students who want to sit for the AP exam at the end of an appropriate course will continue to receive guidance and support from their teachers and college counselors. The Curriculum Guide designates which courses follow a curriculum that serves as preparation for an AP exam and which courses require supplemental work in order to prepare.

Will the absence of the AP designation on courses at Westtown negatively impact my child's college admission process?

This change comes as no surprise to selective colleges. Since the movement began a decade ago, colleges have come to realize that good schools need to reevaluate their rationale for offering AP courses and determine if AP is the best course work they can offer their students. As schools move beyond AP, colleges will look carefully to see what high level course work is being offered. Selective colleges will continue to expect an applicant to take advanced course work in his/her areas of strength and interest. That has not changed and will certainly not change in this time of heightened competition for college admission.

As part of Westtown's recent Curriculum Study, college admission officers at the numerous colleges to which our students often apply were surveyed. They agreed that Westtown has a well-established reputation for offering an excellent, rigorous program of study and for graduating strong creative and critical thinkers. They reassured us that they would continue to study each applicant's transcript individually and look for rigor and depth of study and that our applicants would continue to be very competitive. Colleges were very much in favor of the advanced research centered seminar courses that Westtown is introducing. Independent schools which are a year or more ahead of Westtown in this process report no change in their admission results at selective colleges.

This period of transition will be enhanced by the strong relationship between the College Counseling Office at Westtown School and colleges and universities throughout the country; communication started two years ago about the shift in our curriculum and will continue this year in print, at national and regional conferences, and as college admission officers visit Westtown to recruit our students.

If you have more questions on this topic, please feel free to contact the Admissions Office at 610-399-7900.