

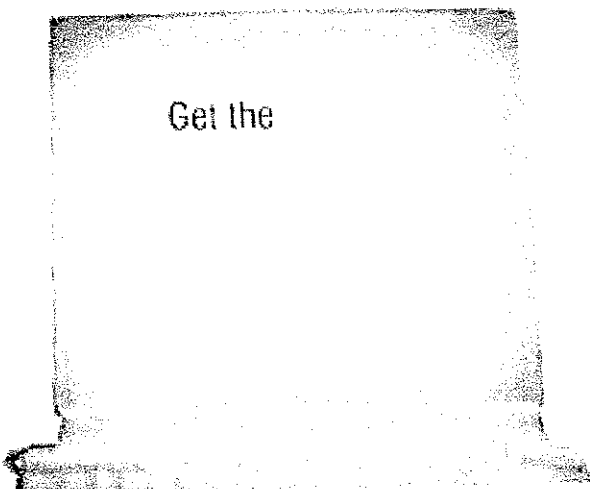
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These critics are not the first to take AP to task, of course. A similarly gloomy report written in 2001 by the National Research Council concluded that as AP expands, the courses, too often, are being led by poorly prepared teachers who teach to the test by stressing rote memorization rather than "active problem solving and discussion." Part of the reason for this is the design of the AP curriculum itself, which calls on teachers to cover a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time. In AP U.S. History, for example, students must be familiar with everything from the pre-Columbian era to the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of America as a world power. Then there's the 20th century to go through as well. The three-hour AP exam ranges over this entire period, which means teachers have to cover all of it at high speed, sometimes at the expense of depth and analysis.



Caution. This troubles some educators, who worry that by trying to become everything to everyone, AP is losing its luster. A dozen high-profile private schools, including the tony Fieldston School in New York and the alternative Crossroads School in Santa Monica, Calif., have dropped their AP courses in recent years, saying the curriculum is too inflexible. Some colleges, meanwhile, are starting to be more cautious about giving APs on transcripts a free pass. Applicants can no longer count on bowling over admissions officers with the sheer number of AP courses they've taken. "We're very careful in training new people to be wary of the fact that this person who has six APs is not obviously better than someone who has two or three," says

Daniel Walls, dean of admissions at Emory University.

Trevor Packer, the College Board's executive director of Advanced Placement, acknowledges that there have been some quality-control problems with AP courses of late: "What we've seen, over the past five years in particular, is too many schools rushing into AP without having an infrastructure in place to support such rigorous academics," he says. Some schools have gone off the reservation entirely, creating AP courses in subjects unapproved by the College Board--

accounting, botany, even one course called AP West Virginia History. New AP teachers are not yet getting enough professional development training, he says. But Packer is quick to emphasize that the program is still quite popular. Some high-profile dissenters notwithstanding, in the past year alone the number of independent schools using AP has jumped by 15 percent--the largest growth of private-school participation in the history of the program.

And Packer points out, quite rightly, that few critics, including UC's Geiser, are questioning the value of the AP exams. There is no need, in other words, to throw the baby out with the bath water: The College Board recently took the first step toward upgrading program quality when it announced a new certification program that will require high schools that use the AP name to be audited by the organization. As of next February, "if they're not providing labs or using textbooks," says Packer, schools will no longer be able to label their courses AP. More schools, in the meantime, do seem to be requiring their students to take the AP exams: Nationwide, some 73 percent of students enrolled in AP courses last year also took the tests, an increase of more than 10 percentage points over the previous decade. Critics' concerns "are valid," says Packer, "but I do think they're being addressed."

It's possible, to be sure, that AP can continue to evolve on all fronts--expanding access to the underprivileged, maintaining its quality, *and* continuing to be a ticket into elite colleges. For students like Neil Panchal, it's what selective schools decide to do with AP that truly matters. As long as so many keep looking for those two magical letters on applications, high schoolers' lives will continue to involve a lot less sleep--and a lot more AP.

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