
Advanced Peer Pressure

Modern high school students and their obligation to AP classes

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AP stands for “Advanced Placement:” as in, if you’re in there then you’ve made the choice to be advanced. Grade-level classes are exactly that, classes that are taught at the level of the grade you’re in. However, recently the expectation is that students should only take advanced classes.

Academic performance in high school all hinges on the end result, on whether or not you look good on paper. All the decisions you make -- what you sign up for, what rules you break, what you want to focus on -- determine your options for colleges, and careers. For life. People are encouraged, almost pressured to push themselves to the absolute max. We’re expected to sign up for lots of extracurriculars, sign up for the highest-level classes possible, because “it will look good on your college application.”

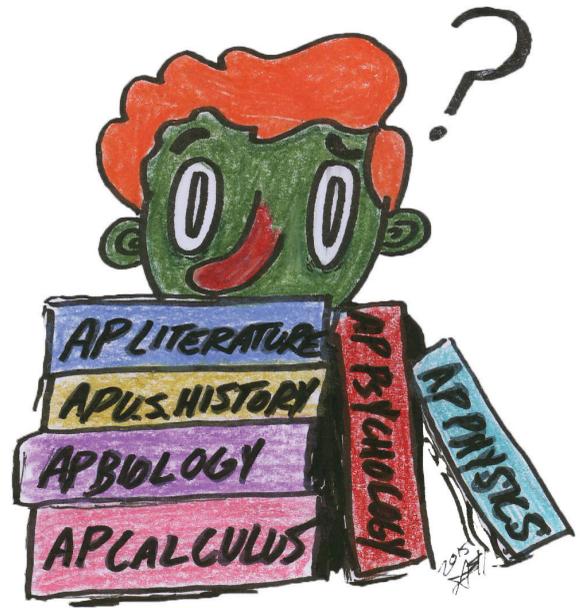
I really do see the value in challenging yourself, trying to succeed academically, and especially being involved in new things. But the fact is that it shouldn’t be for the sake of only being able to record it on an application. And for some students, pushing themselves into higher and higher level classes can be actively detrimental to their learning, and (supposedly even worse) their GPA. By the end of the six weeks, cramming for the test stops being about understanding the material and starts being about getting a certain score. I think that’s true of almost everyone, all thanks to this idea of a college “score sheet” hanging over AP students’ heads that’s more pressing to me as I enter junior year.

There’s a sort of stigma against grade-level classes as well, not just from colleges or parents, but also among students themselves. It seems like all this pressure to succeed has created a poisonous environment where grade-level has somehow become associated with lower level, like you’re less capable if you choose to drop down.

I often feel like I’m way behind where other students are in my Pre-AP pre-calculus class. For me, real understanding of mathematical concepts comes after several in-depth explanations and examples. I don’t want to hold the class back with questions for my teacher, or ask her to repeat herself a million times, so I usually wait until I have an opportunity outside of the class to work on understanding the lesson.

I don’t think that this makes me less capable of precalculus, or less deserving of the acknowledgement for the effort I’m putting in to succeed in that class. Once I can get a grasp on mathematical concepts, I feel very confident about making jumps between lessons and plugging in equations and, I don’t know, throwing around variables and reciprocals. I’m equally capable of doing well on the tests and I’m equally capable of getting the right answer on the confusing real-world problems as my classmates; it just takes me a little longer to get there.

I try to take advantage of tutors and tutorials, and there are lots of YouTube videos detailing the intricacies of cosine graph transformations and inverse tangents. I can use these to finish my



Artwork by Amity Hibler

homework, to catch up, and then I can usually walk into class feeling like I have a great handle on the material (unfortunately, the cycle usually repeats itself, and I end up sitting in class, baffled by the squiggles that our teacher is carefully graphing).

But these tutoring options also take up a considerable chunk of my time; there’s always work from other classes that needs to be done, not to mention responsibilities I have outside of school. Because I have to work so hard to make sure I’m on top of subjects that challenge me, I barely have time to complete the expected workload for other classes.

Honestly, I might be able to learn more successfully in a grade level class. I would probably be able to earn grades equal to the ones I’m earning now without having to spend so much time catching up to the Pre-AP level. But every time that I’ve even considered that option, I decide not to. It’s all part of the earlier outlined stigma (a stigma I’m not immune to) that switching from Pre-AP to grade level is the equivalent of “giving up”. I don’t want to feel like I’m “giving up” on precalculus, because that class is rewarding once I’m able to feel successful.

Beyond my own internal aversion to moving down to grade level, there are the outward consequences: or, more accurately, the judgements from others. It might be viewed by some of my more uptight peers as admitting that I’m less smart or less capable than them. My parents especially, while they might not say it out loud, would probably be disappointed in me if I made the decision to move to a lower-level class than my twin brother. My choice to be in a less rigorous class would be viewed by colleges as not challenging myself enough. The social consequences, while not something I really want to deal with, could be overlooked; but there’s also the chance that that choice could affect my future, which college I get accepted to, and that’s a risk that I’m not really willing to take.

I personally find the emphasis put on every aspect of my academic life -- the PSAT, the level of classes I’m in, my volunteer hours -- extraordinarily stressful, because they all seem to be what will determine where I am in the long run. Your entire academic future, the options that you’re “allowed” to have in terms of careers and opportunities, shouldn’t hinge entirely on the decisions you make in high school. And also, it’s important (for me as well) to remember that switching to a grade-level class isn’t the same thing as choosing to completely abandon “trying hard” at a particular class. It’s important to be able to recognize your own needs and your own capabilities, and to address them.