

The A. P. Discussion...Continued

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The most recent issue of the NAIS journal *Independent School* contains an article written by Roger Weaver, recently retired headmaster of the Crossroads School in California. In his article, entitled “Having the A.P. Conversation – Why It’s Time to Re-evaluate Advanced Placement Courses”, Mr. Weaver raises some timely and important questions about the A. P. curriculum and its relevance in independent schools. Many of his concerns about A. P. courses are precisely the same as those that were expressed by our faculty in the Upper School during the past few years. Those concerns have led us to reduce the number of A. P. offerings in the Upper School and replace those courses with offerings that more closely align with our mission statement, core values, and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Mr. Weaver begins by offering a perspective about college admissions that is all too familiar to those who have experienced the process. “Families who visit colleges and universities and hear a presentation by someone from the admissions office very frequently get this message: ‘If you would like to attend our fine and very competitive institution, it is extremely important that you take all of the A.P. courses you can.’ While that is what college admissions people say, it is not exactly what they *mean*. What they mean is that it is very important that you take all of *the most challenging courses* your school has to offer. So, the question then becomes, are the A.P.s the most challenging courses your school offers? More to the point, is the A.P. the most relevant, substantive, and challenging advanced-level curriculum you are able to offer?”

Mr. Weaver then proceeds to present questions that every school should consider when evaluating the merits of the A.P. curriculum – questions that I am proud to say our faculty has considered at length during the past few years. Two of his questions are particularly powerful and worthy of mentioning here.

Question 1 – “Is the A.P. really strengthening your students’ college admissions profiles?” To address this question, Mr. Weaver offers the following explanation: “All the books, and all the high-priced ‘independent’ college counselors, and all the college counselors in schools are advising students applying to competitive colleges and universities to *differentiate* themselves. Find what will make you stand out from the hoards of other highly qualified students vying for admission to Excellent University, they are told. And yet, the vast majority of schools preparing students for those highly selective colleges and universities are sending along applicants all of whom have *virtually identical transcripts*, A.P. Biology, A.P. U. S. Government and Politics, A.P. this and A.P. that. If you were a college admissions person plowing through mountains of A.P.-laden transcripts and then came across a transcript that had no A.P. Biology, but rather, say ‘Advanced Biological Inquiry – Animal Behavior’ (my substitution from the HH curriculum), what would you think about that kind of differentiation?”

Question 2 – “Why, as an ‘independent’ school, is it a good idea to outsource the top end of your curriculum?” I had never seen the word ‘outsource’ used in connection with the A.P. curriculum and I was intrigued by Mr. Weaver’s use of the term. He offered the following analysis: “The families who entrust their sons and daughters to our schools do so because they believe in what we value in education, and because we take pains to know who our students are and what they most need to succeed academically, socially, and personally. Why, then, would we outsource the top end of our curriculum to a third party that does not know our school, does not know our students, will specify what we have to teach, and will then charge us a fee to let us know how successful we have been in delivering their curriculum to our students?”

Perhaps lost in the discussion of the merits of the A.P. program is a more important consideration for any independent school, and especially for Holland Hall. What are the kinds of educational experiences we believe are valuable for *every student*, no matter what are their plans for college and irrespective of the existence of the A.P. curriculum? Our students in the Upper School are fortunate to attend a school whose entire faculty has been willing to be introspective, ask the difficult questions about curricular offerings, and then create courses that we know will offer every student the best preparation for college and for life in the 21st century.