The Advanced Placement Program at CSUS

Great schools are constantly evolving, utilizing current research on teaching and learning and employing best practices in everything they do. Great schools evolve, but they also evolve in thoughtful, deliberate and mission-driven ways.

CSUS is and has long been a great school and, as such, has been scrutinizing the curriculum—the program, experiences and academic content—for some time now. Three years ago we created a Curriculum Committee, now a standing committee of the faculty, and undertook an in-depth survey of our academics, called the Scope and Sequence. These efforts resulted in a more fully articulated description of what we teach, when we teach it, and why we teach it. We also created a “Dream Catalog” of the courses we would love to offer if we had sufficient enrollment and resources.

The scrutiny of the program resulted in some changes. Advanced Placement (AP) Physics C evolved into "Physics, Engineering and Technology" and AP Biology became "Advanced Topics in Biology." We also began to administer the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA) as a means of measuring our success in developing critical 21st century skills such as creativity, adaptability, problem-solving and collaboration. These improvements led the Curriculum Committee and Department Heads to grapple with a larger question, “Does the AP program provide the best set of academic experiences for our students?”

To answer this question, we created the AP Task Force, led by Kelly Sortino, our Director of College Counseling, and comprised of faculty representation from every department. The task force conducted surveys, contacted and queried the Deans of Admission at several selective colleges and universities, and investigated the experiences of similar independent schools with respect to AP courses. In short, we thoroughly probed the implications of offering--and not offering--AP courses to our students. (View Student survey results and Parent survey results.)

Ultimately, the task force concluded that in order for our Upper School program to evolve in the direction of 21st century skill acquisition, we needed to uncouple the content of our coursework from the AP program. This recommendation was evaluated and accepted by the administration, Department Heads and faculty.

It is important that we clarify the action and intention. **While we intend to uncouple our Upper School academic program from that of the AP program, we will continue to administer the AP exams in the spring.** Thus, students who wish to sit for the exams will have this opportunity. However, the courses, content, inquiries and assessments that we provide our students during the school year will no longer be tied exclusively to the AP program.

Why are we doing this? Why the change? We join a growing number of independent schools who are questioning the value of the AP program. According to a *New York Times* article, “Several elite private high schools have also dropped AP courses,” including Phillips Exeter Academy, The Fieldston School, Crossroads Academy, the University of Chicago Lab School and the Dalton School. Bay Area schools who have made this change include Lick-Wilmerding, Marin Academy and the Urban School. Without exception, these schools report great satisfaction with their decisions.

What’s wrong with the AP program? We are increasingly aware of the fact that these courses tend to be “a mile wide and an inch deep,” that is, focused too much on breadth and memorization at the price of depth, relevancy and modern concepts. In our science classes this meant students were rushing through topics with barely a chance to ask questions or catch their breath. Mr. Woosnam, our physics teacher, said it best when he wrote, “[When I teach AP] I teach to the test. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing if the test is good. But the test to which I’ve been teaching is so broad that I constantly have to be putting off learning ‘the good stuff’ because we have to stick to a bloated and out-of-date syllabus. In order to have my students do as well as possible I have to resort to telling them they won’t understand some material because we don’t have enough time to study it. I have to tell them to memorize without understanding. In my book that is appalling pedagogy.”

Other teachers, in other disciplines, have voiced similar dissatisfaction with the type of teaching and learning the AP program demands. In almost every area of study, the AP necessitates “teaching to the test” at a cost of genuine inquiry and reflection. As the aforementioned *New York Times* article says, “...studies show that most schools do the same canned laboratory exercises, providing little sense of the thrill of ... discovery.” The superficial labs, the lectures
and the rapid pace of these courses, according to a committee of the National Research Council (part of the National Academy of Sciences), "failed to keep pace with research on how people learn; instead of listening to lecture, 'more real learning takes place if students spend more time going into greater depth on fewer topics, allow them to experience problem-solving, controversies and the subtleties of scholarly investigation.'"

What else is wrong the AP program? The academic world is gloriously diverse and engaging, yet AP courses often prevent our talented teachers from including in their classes the wondrous topics that often sparked their own passion for the subject. It hinders spontaneity in the classroom--those moments when a student has read something in National Geographic or in the newspaper that precipitates a question in the classroom. As one of our teachers said, "It's this kind of spontaneous interaction with the material and the world kids live in and read about that I want to foster."

Furthermore, we want our classes to be dynamic, engaging and current. We want our teachers to bring themselves and their intellectual passions for their disciplines to the classroom. We no longer want to outsource the content and instruction of our most rigorous courses to the College Board. The AP syllabi leave our teachers with few incentives for creating their own courses and infusing those courses with their intellectual interests. Uncoupling the content of our classes from the AP syllabi will, in short, provide our students with a chance to engage in more meaningful learning and inquiry, and will provide more opportunities for our students to acquire the critical 21st century skills to which we aspire. These skills will, as we say, prepare students for "their future and not our past."

You can see the difference already in our Advanced Topics in Biology (ATB) class, which, having uncoupled itself from the AP Biology program last year, now includes such topics as cellular and molecular biology, biochemistry, microbiology, medicine, bio-ethics and pathology, all topics excluded from AP Biology. ATB provides our students with opportunities to engage in problem-solving and project-based learning, including case studies where students are asked to offer up diagnoses and treatments as well as "unknown scenarios" where students are asked to identify microbes, bacteria and fungi. The course includes guest speakers and long-term projects--opportunities for our students to undertake a research effort. Contrast this with the twelve prescribed labs the AP program requires, labs that underestimate our students' capabilities and have predictable results.

We have looked closely at the impact this might have on our students' preparation for college-level work and on their college application processes. We believe that this change will have no impact whatsoever on the college admissions process. As Marilyn McGrath-Lewis, the Director of Admissions at Harvard University said, "We look at whether the applicant has taken the high school's most demanding courses. But whether the classes are designated AP or not is irrelevant. Abolishing the AP classes won't hurt the kids." Shawn Abbott, the former Director of Admissions at Stanford said something similar, when, in an interview with Independent Curriculum he reported that those students at "...places where the curriculum is seen as more innovative and risk-taking...often have the intellectual vitality that we seek. The absence of AP courses at these schools doesn't hinder their chances for admission to highly selective colleges and universities in any way."

Harvard and Stanford are not alone in that position. We read responses from Deans of Admission at colleges and universities across the country, including Cornell, Bowdoin, Clark University, Middlebury College, Dartmouth College, the University of Pennsylvania, and New York University. All said the same thing; specifically, whether or not you have taken AP courses and AP exams is irrelevant; what matters is that applicants to this college/university have pursued a challenging course of study at their respective high schools.

Will our students be hurt by the absence of an AP score in their choice of college courses? What about using AP scores to "exempt" oneself from college requirements? In fact, fewer and fewer universities are offering college credit for AP test results, regardless of the score. UCLA and Berkeley, for example, have recently stopped awarding general education credits for AP coursework. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology stopped giving credit for AP Biology in 2007, replacing the AP score as an assessment instrument with its own placement exam. According to Stuart Schmll, MIT's Dean of Admissions, the Biology Department found that "even some students who scored 5's [on the AP] did not have the problem-solving skills needed for higher-level courses."

Don't our students use the AP scores to exempt themselves from introductory courses? Aren't some of them graduating early as a result of their AP scores? A recent survey of our graduates indicated that while 48% received some "advanced standing" as a result of earning a score of 4 or a 5 on an AP examination (AP examinations are graded on a 1-5 scale), only 5% intended to try to graduate early.

Keep in mind that we will continue to administer the AP examinations, thus still providing those students who want to sit for an exam the opportunity to do so. In addition, the courses where students have traditionally used AP scores for "advanced standing" – English, calculus and foreign language – will in all likelihood be only slightly changed by this decision to uncouple our program from the AP content.

The implications of this change, then, are all good. The content of the courses that will replace the Advanced Placement program will be richer, more dynamic and more forward-thinking. Our students will be assessed using a broader variety of means. They will be able to collaborate to a far greater extent than they can now. They will be able to demonstrate
knowledge and mastery in new and innovative ways. They will be able to connect what they learn to other disciplines. They will be prepared for their college-level coursework. They will, in essence, be able to reflect, inquire and demonstrate understanding in ways that we believe are much more forward-thinking and 21st century.

What does this mean for your child’s experiences at CSUS? The program that our faculty envisions will continue to engage your child intellectually and personally. It will include many, if not most of the topics already encompassed by Advanced Placement courses, but the absence of the AP mantle will provide our teachers with the freedom to teach topics they don’t currently have the time to explore. It will allow for more student-initiated projects and internships, investigative research and global experiences—all critically important for 21st century learners. Our teachers will have greater freedom to innovate, bring in new technologies, work together and across other disciplines, and ensure that our programs are current.

You may still have questions about this change. We have attempted to anticipate some of those questions and have compiled them, along with responses, here.

Will my child be hurt in the college process by the absence of AP scores on his/her transcript? No. Every dean of admission we contacted, spoke to and read about was unanimous in their response to this question. Colleges and universities want assurance that the applicants have taken a rigorous academic program that has prepared them for the demands of higher education.

Don’t students have to take AP exams as part of the college process? No. Unlike the SAT, AP scores are not required as part of the application process. AP scores are self-reported by students.

Will you still administer the Advanced Placement examinations? Will my child be provided with the opportunity to sit for one or more of these examinations? Yes. We anticipate continuing to administer AP examinations, with time set aside during the two weeks in May they are given.

Will my child need extra preparation for the AP exam most closely associated with a CSUS course? It depends. In courses like English, calculus and foreign language (the courses where most of our graduates earn "advanced standing"), we anticipate the classroom experiences will continue to sufficiently prepare students for success on those AP examinations. However, it is possible that some additional preparation will be needed for success on other AP examinations, such as European History and Physics B, just as it is today.

In the wake of this decision, how do you envision the Upper School program evolving? We have already developed new courses for next year. "Micro-economics and Finance," "Modern Middle-East Studies," "Engineering," and "Introduction to Computer Programming" are all new offerings for next year. For a more thorough exploration of what our teachers are proposing, see "The Dream Catalog" (PDF).

How will you assess the new courses and their ability to prepare CSUS students for college? We intend to employ some of the same techniques we currently use, techniques such as alumni surveys, course evaluations and the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA). The Curriculum Committee also intends to devise a course assessment instrument that the Department Heads will use to evaluate the rigor of all courses (not exclusively the new courses).

For more information, please join Christy Dillon and me for a Town Hall Meeting on Monday, January 30th in the Mansion Conference room, beginning at 6:30 PM and ending at 8:00 PM. We will provide details on the process behind this decision and field your questions. Several faculty members will also be in attendance to share their thoughts.

Sincerely,

Amy C. Richards
Head of School

Crystal Springs Uplands School | 400 Uplands Drive | Hillsborough, CA 94010 | 650-342-4175