

How Important is it to Take AP Classes for College Admissions?

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By Allison Slater Tate

It's the most common question college admissions counselors get: Is it better to take a standard or honors class and get an A, or take an AP class and get a B?

The answer, of course, is to take an AP class and get an A, but it's not that simple. Before families choose which classes are the right fit for their high school student, they should understand what AP classes are, how they differ from standard and honors-level classes, and whether they're worth taking.

What is an AP class?

AP stands for Advanced Placement, a curriculum and exam program created and run by The College Board, the same company that provides the SAT. AP classes are taught by teachers trained in a standardized, higher rigor curriculum that The College Board asserts will give students "time management, critical thinking, and scholarly writing" skills.

At the end of an AP course, students are invited to take an exam that will be graded on a scale of 1 to 5, with scores of 3, 4, and 5 considered "passing." Students may be able to convert those AP exam scores to full or partial college credit with participating colleges and universities.

How are AP classes different from honors classes?

Why would colleges value AP classes on a student's transcript? Former University of Pennsylvania Dean of Admissions Eric J. Furda told TODAY Parents the standardized curriculum and exam scores can provide insight about where a student is academically. "Since there isn't a national curriculum in the United States like the French Baccalaureate or the GCSE/A Levels in the UK, there is tremendous variation in courses and grading systems across American secondary schools," said Furda, who recently co-authored "The College Conversation." "Courses can be categorized as 'college prep,' standard, advanced or honors. Perhaps a school offers the International Baccalaureate (IB); others may offer The College Board's Advanced Placement courses."

This third-party standard gives courses from AP and IB value, Furda said. "This may be important to admission committees which may not be familiar with a particular high school and these courses can provide some known context," he said.

How important are AP classes?

If a school offers AP classes, taking them can be a valuable addition to a high school transcript, said Jeffrey Selingo, author of "Who Gets In and Why."

"Advanced Placement is considered more rigorous than standard or even honors courses in most high schools," he said. "As college admissions officers review applications, their biggest question is always whether the student can do the work at this particular campus." This is especially true in math and sciences, Selingo said, because AP courses can demonstrate that kids have mastered those subjects.

AP classes in core subjects such as calculus, physics, and English language and composition might be considered more valuable in admissions reviews than electives such as art history or psychology. The exams might not be "easier," but the course content is considered less fundamental to college preparation.

How many AP classes should a student take?

AP classes are valued by colleges, but that doesn't mean a student has to take as many as they possibly can, Selingo said.

"While AP courses have been found to equate with better performance in college, research has found that those improvements in college tend to level out for students once they take five AP courses," he said. "In other words, taking eight or 10 AP courses doesn't really influence how well students do in college, and admissions officers know that."

University of Virginia Associate Dean of Admission Jeannine Lalonde addressed this on her blog, "Notes from Peabody."

"Plenty of people want to know how many AP courses a student should take to be competitive in our process," she wrote. "We don't approach applications this way. First of all, not everyone goes to a school with APs as an option. Second, some schools limit how many AP courses a student may take. Third, with the number of AP courses offered these days, you can rack up a lot of APs in just one subject. There could be students with big AP numbers who have never taken an advanced class in multiple core areas."

What's better: AP or dual enrollment?

As Lalonde said in a [TikTok video](#), colleges will defer to a school's profile, written by the administration or counseling team, to understand whether AP classes or dual enrollment classes — which are taught by community college or university professors, for both high school and college credit — are more rigorous at that particular school.

Having spent time in several admissions offices, Selingo said the AP and International Baccalaureate classes had an advantage, generally, over dual enrollment.

"AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) are seen as more rigorous by many colleges because they are assessed by national organizations," he said. "Dual enrollment courses offered by local colleges are seen by some admissions officers as more uneven and depend on the institution offering them."

But the value of dual enrollment classes goes beyond college admissions; they can impact a student's high school education by broadening their choices. "Dual enrollment courses through a local college can help expand top-level course offerings in languages, math and science (among others) to a local school district," Furda said. "Miami-Dade County in Florida leverages the local college with Miami public schools to expand course offerings."

What if my school doesn't offer AP?

Some school districts and independent schools design their own courses instead of offering AP or IB. These courses can be just as rigorous, and the schools will make that clear to colleges.

Students whose high schools don't offer AP will not be at a disadvantage, as every college reviews transcripts within that context. The vast majority of colleges do not review AP exam scores in admissions, either. With the exception of highly selective universities, most colleges only use AP exam scores to determine credit and class placement.

With all of this in mind, the answer to the age-old question is a little more clear: It is better to take an AP class and get a B, if it is available at the school and appropriate for the student, than it is to take a standard or honors-level class and earn an A.