

Names

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AP Language

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### A Growing Need

From 2004 to 2009, the number of students taking Advanced Placement classes in the United States rose nearly 50 percent, up to 1.6 million students (“The Advanced Placement Juggernaut”). Colleges view AP classes and the students who sign up for them seriously, meaning that students who take the advanced classes are more likely to get into elite colleges. However, at Helena High School only five AP classes are offered out of a possible thirty-three classes AP classes (“AP Central – Course Home Pages”). As more schools begin to offer AP classes, Helena High is falling behind, putting its students at a disadvantage when it comes to being admitted to college. Helena High School should take advantage of the opportunity to provide a more rigorous high school education, better prepare its students for college, and increase the likelihood of students getting accepted into competitive colleges by expanding the options for AP classes.

A program that initially began in the 1950s, the Advanced Placement Program was designed to give American students an academic edge by having high schools and colleges work together. More advanced students were given the opportunity to take college-level classes. The program soon began to expand as more schools began to take advantage of the opportunity of having students take college level classes while still in high school (“The History of the AP Program”). Even in just the past two years the number of students taking AP classes has increased a drastic 65 percent and 2.3 million

tests are administered each year (“AP – Report to the Nation”, Lewin). While Helena High School offers five AP classes, the diversity of such classes is limited and prevents many students from studying a subject they are interested in at a higher level (*Student Registration Handbook*). By only providing AP Psychology, Language, Literature, Government, and US History, Helena High is ignoring math and science while also not allowing for more advanced learning in almost every other area of study. Although students who choose to take the Honors Biology II have the opportunity to take the AP test in May, the class is not taught as rigorously as an AP class and studies have shown that students who do not take AP classes are not as likely to do well on the AP tests as students who benefited from in-depth, advanced classes (Mathews). Students who are unable to take AP classes also do not experience the benefits that AP students receive in college, such as increased preparation for the level of work required in higher education classes. The Art Department, along with the Foreign Language Department, also lack any AP classes and so students interested in these areas do not have the opportunity to study these subjects at higher levels. Without the opportunity to take AP classes, students are not receiving the most in-depth and beneficial education possible, and are subsequently not prepared for college at the same level as students who were able to take AP classes (Matthews).

When compared to neighboring high schools, such as Bozeman High School and Stevensville High School, Helena High School falls behind. Bozeman High School offers a total of 15 AP classes, a far larger offering than the five AP classes that Helena High offers (“BHS Online”). Stevensville High School also has more AP classes than Helena High, offering 10 AP classes at the school and even more AP classes online

(Nebel). Both Bozeman High School and Stevensville High School made the Newsweek list of the top 1,000 schools in the country, the only schools in Montana to make the list. "We offer more AP courses than any other school in the state," Bozeman High School's associated principal Bill Franks said, when asked why Bozeman High is among the few Montana schools on the list (Schontzler). Although Helena High School has improved its offerings of AP classes in recent years with the addition of AP Psychology and AP Language, there are still further improvements that should be made to expand the academic opportunity that students are exposed to at this school. Even though some teachers at Helena High believe that the strict structure of the curricula of the AP classes means that teachers are unable to explore subjects that they find interesting, the writing and studying skills developed in AP classes are hugely beneficial to the students when they enter college. The benefits of increased AP classes can not be ignored as students try to get the best high school education they can before going to college.

While the Advanced Placement Program has grown, studies are finding that students who take AP classes are experiencing the benefit of being able to explore their interests while still in high school, making AP classes a key component for students to study subjects that interest them at an advanced level. With a variety of AP classes that could be offered, such as Studio Art and Music Theory, students would be able to study what they are interested in, meaning that by the time they get to college they will already have experience at a college level in the subjects that interest them. Students are able to then go even further into the subjects they are studying as their college education continues. A study performed in 1998 noted that students who took AP classes took more college classes in their AP subject areas than non-AP students (Morgan). Taking

AP core classes, like AP Biology, is also beneficial to students, even if they have no plan to study the subjects further in college. By taking these classes in high school and then passing the AP test, they are able to avoid taking those classes in college and are instead able to take classes that have a direct relation to what they are majoring in as they will have already received credit for those courses (“Advanced Placement Program”). In fact, a University of Texas study found that the students who used their AP credits to take more advanced courses in college had better grades in those courses than similar students who first took college introductory courses instead of AP in 10 subjects (Mathews). The amount of knowledge gained in AP classes is much higher than in non-AP classes, meaning that students get more out of their education.

While providing more extensive learning for students while in high school, AP classes further help students in college by preparing them for more advanced work. A group of Texas researchers found that even a score of 2 out of a possible 5 points on an AP exam allows for better college performance than those achieved by students who did not take AP classes or who skipped the AP exam. Even though they received no college credit as colleges generally only give credit to students who score above a 3, the students were better prepared for the level of work required by college classes (Mathews). A 1998 study showed that “AP students who were exempted from the introductory courses in mathematics and science generally earned the same or higher course grades in the second-level courses than students who took the introductory course on the college campus” (Morgan). Students who took AP classes learned how to cope with the workload of college level classes, as well as learned strong study habits that benefited them in college. AP students also benefit from the development of their writing skills,

allowing them to better express their thoughts in college classes. Students master in-depth content at the college level more easily after completing AP courses in high school, giving students advanced academic skills and increased self-confidence in preparation for college. This extra help allows future college students to excel in college because they have already experienced some of what is required in college (“Scholarships.com”)

The preparation for college provided by AP classes allows students to succeed in college, while the AP classes also help students gain access to competitive colleges where the skills they learned in AP classes can be utilized. AP classes have begun to play a large role in whether a student is admitted into many schools. The most competitive colleges are especially looking closely at the types of classes that students take in high school. Peter Van Buskirk, a former admissions dean at Franklin & Marshall College, says, “The harder a school is to get into, the more you need to show that you are moving to the next logical level of rigor” (“An Admissions Dean’s Tips”). When colleges accept students, they want to know if the student can handle college work and more rigorous and advanced classes help prove to Admission Office’s that a student is capable. The more AP classes a student takes also proves that the student is willing to challenge themselves and work hard. However, because Helena High School only offers five AP classes, students are limited in how much they can challenge themselves (*Student Registration Handbook*). When students who have only taken a few AP classes are compared to students who have taken many of the advanced classes, the students who did not have the opportunity to take more classes look less prepared. Bozeman High School, which offers 15 AP classes, also happens to have a higher average ACT and SAT score than the state of Montana (“BHS Online”). While Bozeman High School students have higher ACT

and SAT scores than other students, they also look better prepared for college due to the higher number of AP classes that they can take. The lack of AP classes can actually hurt a student's chance of getting into a competitive college.

The low cost for receiving credit from an AP class in comparison to the price of getting college credit while in college also helps students get the most from their education, both in high school and college. With the price for each AP exam \$86 dollars, students have the opportunity to receive college credit, something that often costs thousands of dollars a year at college, while they are still attending high school ("AP: Fees"). Students could potentially save upwards of \$10,000 dollars simply by taking AP classes in high school. Colleges such as Brown University and Dartmouth either offer credit for passing AP tests or allow for students to forgo introductory courses, meaning that at these competitive colleges, where tuition is often close to \$40,000 per year, students can begin to take more advanced courses sooner getting more out of their money. When credit is given for passing AP tests, as it is in departments such as History at Brown, students have the possibility of graduating in fewer than 8 semesters, saving the students more than \$20,000 in room, board, and tuition ("Advanced Placement Information"). Even at colleges in Montana the financial benefits for students are substantial. For example, in-state students at the University of Montana, where tuition is \$5,530 per year, would be able to save money by receiving credit for freshman classes while in high school. Classes such as AP Calculus BC would give students 8 semester credits while they are still in high school simply by receiving a score of 3 or higher on the test ("AP Credit"). By receiving those credits before entering college, students could save hundreds of dollars. In the 2009 exit survey of the senior class at Helena High,

61.79 percent of students said that they plan to attend a four year college immediately after high school, showing that a majority of students at Helena High could benefit from these financial benefits if more AP classes were offered (“Senior Exit Survey Results). However, the lack of AP classes limits the financial advantages that a Helen High student has access to, meaning that an increase in the AP classes offered at Helena High could greatly help offset the high price of college.

Because AP classes are so beneficial to students in their high school and college careers, more AP classes are needed at Helena High to allow students to have access to the classes that will be most helpful to them. Having advanced classes in subjects such as art, science, and math would allow students to study these subjects at a higher level than is currently available. Rosa Lincoln, a junior at Helena High, said that she would definitely take an AP art class if one was offered, saying, “I would have an opportunity to get a higher education in art and get a taste of what a college art class would feel like.” Many other students share her feelings, wanting to have the opportunity to take more advanced and diverse classes. With classes such as Japanese Language and Culture and European History (a class that happens to be offered at Capital High School), students often express their wish to be able to take these classes. Sarah Capedeville, another junior at Helena High, commented that, “I am currently taking Honors Biology II and plan on taking the AP test, but I am going to have to do most of the studying on my own because the class just won’t prepare me for the test. I would love to be able to study Biology at a high level.” The addition AP Chemistry and AP Biology to Helena High would be beneficial because there is currently no opportunity for students to take science classes at an advanced level. The science classes offered at Helena High are not taught as

rigorously as AP classes are and so students do not receive the enough knowledge to pass an AP test based on the class alone. Many students have commented that Honors Biology II is actually easier than Honors Biology I, even though Honors Biology II is supposed to prepare students for the AP Biology test if they wish to take it. Other classes that could be offered as AP are also missing, such as Macroeconomics and Computer Science, both of which would help students when they attend college. The number of AP classes needs to be expanded in order for students to keep up with students who come from far more elite schools.

While many students believe that more AP classes are necessary, teachers also have a strong opinion on whether Helena High needs more AP classes. Many teachers felt that the advanced classes were a valuable part of the curriculum. One teacher surveyed said that “students needed to be challenged and offered those opportunities.” Other teachers agreed, saying that the classes “offer a higher level to attain to.” They felt as if AP classes were important for a well-balanced curriculum. However, other teachers felt differently about the AP classes, saying that dual-credit courses are more valuable. Nevertheless, this same teacher still agreed that AP classes “had their place.” Another teacher objected to the strict structure of AP curricula, but the fact remains that taking AP classes better prepares students for college (Morgan). Science teachers also offered their opinion about adding AP classes. A biology teacher felt that AP Biology was necessary for students to truly get a full science education and believed that the addition of AP environmental science would increase the quality of education available at Helena High. She understood that one of the main reasons for a lack of AP classes was not enough funding or staff, but said that she would teach an AP Biology class if she



could. Another teacher felt that expansion of AP classes was necessary in all areas of study so that “kids [could] have expanded opportunities in any area in which they’re competent or interested. Not dual credit, things like AP classes at this school. Things like history, the humanities, and science.”

As AP classes begin to appear in more subjects across the country, Helena High should take into account the benefits of a rigorous and academic high school education, increased preparation for college, and the higher chance of a student getting accepted into a competitive college and expand the options for AP classes that are available to students. The huge increase in AP students in the last 6 years as well as the rise in impact these classes have on college admissions means that interest in the Advanced Placement Program has risen. If Helena High School continues to only offer five AP classes, then the school will fall behind other schools academically and students will not be as prepared or as knowledgeable as they can be when they enter college.

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