

Course-Credit Inflation?

Ensuring That 'Advanced Courses' Live Up to Their Labels

By **Chrys Dougherty,**
Lynn Mellor, & Shuling Jian

Recent policy initiatives have focused on getting students, particularly disadvantaged students, to take more advanced courses in high school. According to a recent report by Achieve Inc., eight states have adopted policies to make a college-readiness course sequence the default curriculum for all their students. Twelve states have "state scholars" programs that encourage students to take a college-preparatory high school curriculum, and all 50 states and the District of Columbia now offer incentives for students to take Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual-enrollment courses.

As enrollment in advanced courses has expanded to include a large percentage of the student population, troubling evidence has accumulated that high percentages of students receiving credit for these courses are not learning the content implied by their course titles. This evidence is particularly strong for disadvantaged students. It has proved to be much easier to enroll and give students credit for a course labeled "Algebra 2" than it has been to ensure that those students actually learn algebra.

It has proved to be much easier to enroll and give students credit for a course labeled 'Algebra 2' than it has been to ensure that those students actually learn algebra.

An analogy may be made to truth-in-labeling laws in business. A company selling an orange-colored beverage under the label "orange juice" can get into legal trouble if the beverage contains little or no actual juice. There are no consequences, however, for giving credit for Algebra 2 to students who have learned little algebra. In some cases, the problem is the lack of a standard definition of the content of an Algebra 2 course; in other cases, districts and states lack measures of whether the defined content has been taught and learned; and in still other cases, students receive credit for courses even though available measures indicate that they have not learned the content implied by the course titles.

Giving students credit for courses whose content they have not learned may be labeled "course-credit inflation," analogous to the concept of grade inflation. In the case of grade



Susan Sanford

inflation, the knowledge and skill level of the median student receiving an A declines over time. In the case of course-credit inflation, the level of content mastery attained by the median student receiving credit for a course with a given title declines over time.

The problem of course titles not reflecting course content, let alone what students are learning, has received attention from national organizations. The College Board has announced an initiative to review the content of courses taught under the Advanced Placement label. ACT Inc. has developed a system to audit the content of high school courses and has written a report with the Education Trust on the content of model advanced high school courses.

Most states don't have the longitudinal data systems needed to monitor the relationship between coursetaking in high school and college outcomes. Only eight states collect individual-level data on student coursetaking, and only two states, Texas and Florida, can connect individual student records on course completion, state-exam results, SAT and ACT scores, and the need for remediation in college. In Texas, matching student course-completion and test results revealed that:

- Sixty percent of low-income students, 65 percent of African-American students, and 57 percent of Hispanic students who received course credit for Geometry and Algebra 2 failed a state exit exam covering Geometry and Algebra 1.

- Fifty-eight percent of low-income students, 67 percent of African-American students, and 57 percent of Hispanic students who received course credit for Algebra 1 in 1999 failed the corresponding end-of-course exam.

- Sixty-three percent of low-income, 61 percent of African-American, and 59 percent of Hispanic students who graduated under the state's Recommended High School (college-preparatory) Program in 2000 needed remediation in one or more subjects when they enrolled in Texas public higher education institutions.

- Of the low-income students in the 2002 high school graduating cohort taking Advanced Placement courses, fewer than one in seven passed any AP exams. The corresponding percentage of low-income AP exam-takers who passed was less than one in four.

We believe that a similar analysis in other states, if the data were available, would yield similar results.

The likely predominant reason for the poor performance of disadvantaged students receiving credit for advanced courses is their lack of academic readiness for those courses. An important predictor of students' ability to learn new course content is their possession of prior relevant knowledge. Teachers often find it difficult to teach Algebra 2 to students who need help with Algebra 1 or even pre-algebra. Lack of success in elementary and middle school is likely to affect student motivation as well.

Traditionally, schools addressed the problem of student preparation for advanced courses by restricting enrollment in those courses to the best-prepared students. This approach led to the traditional outcome that few students took advanced courses. Minority student enrollees in advanced courses were especially scarce. This approach is not likely to meet the goal of preparing the majority of low-income and minority students for college and skilled careers.

But the more recent approach of enrolling students in courses without making a systematic effort to get them ready is not working well either. An analogy may be drawn to the debate over social promotion. Giving students credit for courses whose content they haven't learned is like socially promoting a student who is unready for the next grade. But excluding students from advanced courses—like retaining the student without offering appropriate interventions—also fails to produce the desired result.

As is the case with policies for promoting students, the only real solution is to do what it takes to get students ready. Workable remedies are likely to include the following elements:

- *Identification of a K-8 curricular path that prepares students for advanced courses in high school.* Raising expectations for students in high school requires a corresponding upgrade of the curriculum in kindergarten through 8th grade.

- *Extensive use of data and intervention in grades K-8.* Most of the interventions need to happen early, so that as many students as possible enter high school with the prerequisite

skills they will need to succeed in advanced courses. For students who enter high school with major deficiencies in prerequisite skills, achieving success in multiple advanced courses is a Herculean task.

- *Intervention with high school students to build the prerequisite skills prior to their enrollment in advanced courses.* Some high schools strongly encourage students with missing prerequisite skills to enroll in summer programs that address those skills.

- *Interventions to affect middle and high school students' motivation to enroll in and succeed in advanced courses.* High-performing schools and districts are more likely to use programs and strategies that help create a culture of achievement among their students. The AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, program has been used for this purpose in a number of districts.

- *Interventions with students while they are taking the course.* Higher-performing schools and districts are more likely to use periodic exams during the course to identify students who are having difficulty, and to organize teachers into problem-solving teams to address those students' problems.

- *Use of end-of-course exams to monitor whether students in each course have learned the course content.* Without these exams, schools and districts may not know if their students have consumed "orange juice" or "orange drink." Two Broad Prize for Urban Education winners, Garden Grove, Calif., and Long Beach, Calif., have developed additional end-of-course exams in courses that are not tested by the state.

Many school systems are beginning to take the first difficult steps down the path of preparing the majority of students from all backgrounds to learn content that in the past was standard fare only for the best-prepared and most-advanced students. Learning from the practices of the most successful among them is critical if others are to follow. ■

Chrys Dougherty and Lynn Mellor are the director and the associate director of research at the National Center for Educational Accountability, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization based in Austin, Texas. Shuling Jian is a former researcher at the center who now works for Deloitte & Touche. This essay is adapted from their paper "Orange Juice or Orange Drink?," released in February and available online at www.just4kids.org and www.dataqualitycampaign.org.

Reprinted with permission from Education Week, Vol. 25, Number 51, September 6, 2006, by The Reprint Dept., 800-259-0470

EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICES:

Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 280-3100
FAX Editorial (301) 280-3200
FAX Business (301) 280-3250

Education Week is published 44 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 44 issues. Canada: \$135.94 for 44 issues. ©2006 Editorial Projects in Education.