
Validity Evidence for AP[®] English Literature Following Score Changes in May 2022

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Introduction

As institutional AP[®] Credit and Placement policies permit, students use their AP scores to place out of introductory college courses and move directly into higher-level subsequent coursework. The use of AP Exam scores to make course placement decisions in this way is a key test validity question, and the College Board partners with four-year colleges and universities around the country to develop a longitudinal database of student-level college outcomes to study it. The administrative data collected includes information about the courses students take and the grades they earn. We use this information, along with information about the AP Credit and Placement policies in effect at the institution, to examine how AP students perform in subsequent courses in the subject area of the exam when they use their AP Exam scores to place out of the equivalent introductory college course.

Previous research has demonstrated that students who use their AP scores to place out of introductory courses perform as well or better in subsequent courses as students who take the equivalent introductory college course.¹ Individual institutions or systems can also conduct their own AP validity studies. A resource for doing so is the Admitted Class Evaluation Service[™] (ACES[™]), which is a free online service from the College Board that colleges and universities can use to understand how performance on AP Exams relates to student performance in subsequent coursework for their specific population in their specific courses.²

The validity argument for assessment scores for a given use involves ongoing evaluation especially as tests are redesigned or other changes are implemented. In spring of 2022, the AP Program adopted the use of an evidence-based standard setting (EBSS) process to set AP Exam performance levels that determine the scores students receive on the 1 to 5 AP scale. When applied to AP English Literature, the process found conclusively that a larger percentage of AP English Literature students were demonstrating the proficiency required for college credit than earlier standard setting protocols based on fewer data points had suggested. The analysis in this brief examines how AP English Literature students perform in subsequent college courses following the scoring changes.

¹ See for example: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609020.pdf>

² See here for more information: <https://aces.collegeboard.org>

Data and Methodology

We studied students in 12th grade from the high school graduating class of 2022 who took the AP English Literature Exam in May of 2022, subsequently graduated high school, and enrolled in college in fall of 2022. Analyses indicate that 87% of students who earned a score of 3 on the exam, 93% of students who earned a score of 4 on the exam, and 95% of students who earned a score of 5 on the exam were high school seniors indicating that results from the 2022 cohort, focused as they are on seniors, are representative of most students who took the AP English Literature Exam in 2022.

We compared subsequent course grades for AP students who placed out of the introductory course to students who did not take the AP English Literature Exam in high school but did take the equivalent introductory college course as matriculated college students in the 2022-23 academic year, per the AP Credit and Placement Policy at the institution. We refer to this second group of students as “non AP” although it is possible they took the AP course. If students took two or more subsequent courses simultaneously in the same semester, an average of grades is used. For an institution to be included in our analysis, the institution must specify a specific introductory course in their published policy for which AP Exam takers can receive credit and/or higher-level placement for a score of 3, 4, or 5.

We ran analyses separately for students who scored a 3, 4, and 5 on the AP English Literature Exam. To be included in one of the AP score groups, AP Exam takers eligible for higher-level placement could not have taken the equivalent introductory course(s) on campus and must have completed a subsequent course(s) in the same subject. To be included in the corresponding non-AP comparison group, students must not have taken the AP English Literature Exam and must have taken the equivalent introductory course(s) on campus as well as a subsequent course(s) in the same subject.

While AP Exam takers appear in only one group based on score, students who did not take the AP Exam could appear in multiple groups depending on whether the AP Credit and Placement Policy is the same or different for each AP score at the institution. For example, if an institution enabled students to place out of English Literature 101 for an AP score of 3, and both English Literature 101 and 102 for AP scores of 4 or 5, then a non-AP student who took English Literature 101 and a subsequent course in English would be in the non-AP 3 comparison group whereas a non-AP student who took English 101 and 102 and a subsequent course in English would be in the non-AP 4 and 5 comparison groups.

The final sample for our analysis includes data from 22 colleges and universities and over 20,000 AP and non-AP students. As Table 1 shows, the sample institutions are spread out across the country and are mostly public with varying enrollment sizes and with most colleges and universities accepting between 50% and 75% of applicants.³ The Appendix describes demographic and achievement characteristics of the students who participated in the study. Fourteen of the institutions enable credit and placement for scores of 3 or higher and eight require a score of 4 or higher.

Table 1. Characteristics of Institutions in AP English Literature Validity Sample

Number of Institutions		22
U.S. Region	Middle States	18%
	Midwest	27%
	Mid-Atlantic	0%
	New England	5%
	South	36%
	Southwest	14%
	West	0%
Control	Public	68%
	Private	32%
Admittance Rate	Under 50%	0%
	50% to 75%	64%
	Over 75%	36%
Undergraduate Enrollment	1,000–4,999	32%
	5,000–9,999	9%
	10,000–19,999	14%
	20,000 and above	45%

³ For an institution to be included in our analysis, the institution must specify a specific introductory course in their published policy for which AP Exam takers can receive credit and/or higher-level placement for a score of 3, 4, or 5. The selective institutions for which we had college course outcome data for did not have a published credit and placement policy for AP English Literature that was specific enough for us to use in the analysis. In most cases, the issue was that a specific equivalent course, which is used to form our non-AP comparison group, was not stated in the policy. In a few instances, the college or university had no published policy at all, provided elective credit, or when an equivalent course was noted, we did not find a record of any students taking the equivalent course.

Results

Figure 1 shows average grades in subsequent English college course for AP students who use their AP English Literature courses to place out of the equivalent introductory course compared to non-AP students who take the equivalent course before moving on. The orange bars in the figure represent the average subsequent course grade among students who did not take the AP English Literature Exam in high school but who took the equivalent introductory course in college. The blue bars represent the average subsequent course grade for AP students.

As the figure shows, AP students earning a score of 3, 4, and 5 on the AP English Literature Exam continue to earn higher average grades in subsequent courses than comparison students after the application of EBSS that resulted in scoring changes. Specifically, AP 3 students earn on average .16 higher grades (3.53 vs. 3.37), AP 4 students earn on average .34 higher grades (3.71 vs. 3.37) and AP 5 students earn on average .60 higher grades (3.82 vs. 3.22) in subsequent courses than non-AP students.

Figure 1: Average Grades in Subsequent English College Courses for AP Students Who Place Out of the Introductory College Course and Non-AP Students Who Do Not

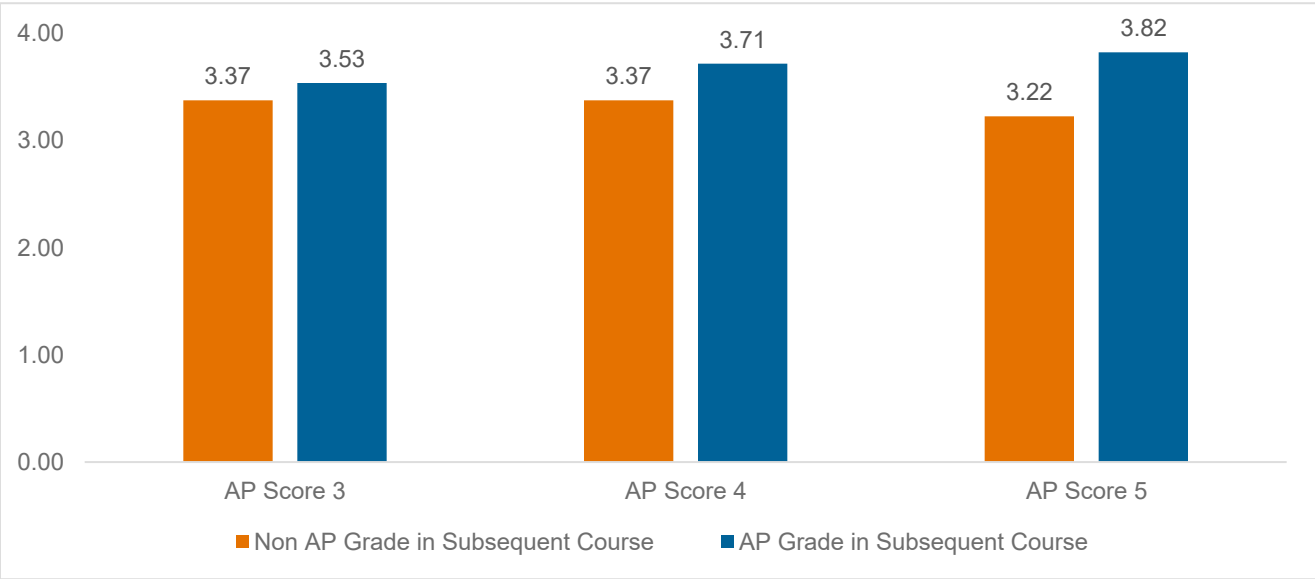


Figure note: All differences between the AP and non-AP groups are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Conclusion

Results from this analysis confirm that students who earn credit-granting scores of 3 or higher on the AP English Literature Exam and use their scores to place out of equivalent introductory college courses continue to do well in subsequent courses. This is impressive given these AP students did not take the introductory course on the college campus as matriculated college students. When we compare the results in this brief to previously published results, we see a reduction in the degree to which AP English Literature students outperform their non-AP counterparts, as we would expect.⁴ The reduction is about half for AP 3 students and smaller for AP 4 and AP 5 students. Evidence from this study indicates that even when more students earn credit-granting scores of 3 or higher on the AP English Literature Exam they perform better on average in subsequent courses than comparison students.

⁴ See <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609020.pdf>

Appendix A

Table A1. Student Characteristics by AP and Non-AP Groups

		Non-AP Comparison Groups			AP Groups		
		3	4	5	3	4	5
Number of Students		7,126	7,773	2,149	1,519	1,327	528
Gender	Female	49%	49%	48%	64%	66%	70%
	Male	45%	44%	43%	33%	32%	29%
	No Response/Missing	7%	7%	9%	3%	2%	2%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%
	Asian American	4%	5%	7%	10%	15%	17%
	Black/African American	9%	8%	3%	5%	3%	2%
	Hispanic	8%	8%	12%	25%	12%	8%
	Native Hawaiian	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	White	65%	64%	62%	52%	62%	65%
	Two or More Race	4%	3%	3%	3%	4%	4%
	No Response/Missing	10%	10%	12%	3%	4%	3%
High School GPA	A+	7%	7%	5%	14%	22%	30%
	A	26%	26%	22%	36%	44%	42%
	A-	24%	25%	24%	24%	19%	16%
	B+	17%	16%	18%	9%	6%	4%
	B	9%	9%	11%	5%	2%	1%
	B-	3%	3%	3%	2%	0%	0%
	C+	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
	C	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	C- or Lower	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	No Response/Missing	12%	12%	15%	10%	8%	6%

Appendix A Continued: Student Characteristics by AP and Non-AP Groups

		Non-AP Comparison Groups			AP Groups		
		3	4	5	3	4	5
SAT® Composite Score Band	1400–1600	3%	4%	3%	4%	17%	33%
	1200–1390	17%	17%	14%	33%	49%	41%
	1000–1190	39%	38%	37%	37%	17%	6%
	800–990	21%	20%	20%	6%	0%	0%
	600–790	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
	400–590	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Missing	19%	20%	24%	19%	16%	20%
Highest Parental Education	No High School Diploma	2%	2%	3%	6%	1%	1%
	High School Diploma	15%	14%	17%	18%	11%	7%
	Associate Degree	5%	5%	5%	4%	4%	4%
	Bachelor's Degree	40%	40%	36%	39%	42%	39%
	Graduate Degree	26%	27%	24%	28%	39%	47%
	No Response/Missing	12%	12%	15%	5%	3%	3%

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