University Council on Teaching
Report and Recommendations on Advanced Placement at Boston College
June 2009

Introduction

The University Council on Teaching discussed the use of Advanced Placement (AP) by students entering Boston College during several of its meetings this spring. The Council is concerned that as BC attracts a greater number of better students and as AP courses proliferate across the country, more and more students are replacing university Core courses with AP courses taken in high school. We believe this goes against the goal of a liberal arts education experience for all Boston College students and likely also has consequences for the Core program itself.

Background

During the UCT's deliberations on AP, the committee met with Mary French, Associate Director for Transfer Admissions, Office of Undergraduate Admission, who is in charge of Advanced Placement for Undergraduate Admissions, and with Professor Richard Cobb-Stevens, Director of the Core Curriculum. We sincerely thank these individuals for assisting the Committee.

The University Core Curriculum consists of 15 semester courses (see Appendix 1 or http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/resources/policy.html#corecur). (The College of Arts and Sciences and the Carroll School of Management also have a language proficiency requirement, but this is not a formal part of the University Core program.) Advanced Placement Units can be used by students to place out of classes at BC, but do not count toward the 38 courses needed to graduate, unless a student has AP Units equal to eight or more three-credit courses and applies for Advanced Standing. While there are several different types of AP Units (see http://www.bc.edu/admission/undergrad/process/advstanding.html), the principal ones used by our incoming students are the College Board Advanced Placement Exams. Most, but not all, students taking these exams have completed corresponding AP courses in high school. The exams are largely multiple-choice tests and are scored on a scale of one to five. Currently, students need a score of four or five in subject areas other than the foreign languages to be exempt from a BC required course. There are about 40 different subject area tests offered by the College Board (see http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/subjects.html).

The Problem

Data compiled by Admissions and provided by Mary French indicates that the entering Class of 2012 achieved AP qualifying scores on 4,861 high-school AP tests or, on average, more than two per incoming student. The number for any given student varies widely, from zero to more than eight. There is no University-wide data on the number of students who use AP courses to actually place out of Core courses. However, data from an informal 2008 Student Services survey of degree audits for 357 students in the Class

of 2009 in five selected majors[1] indicate that about 60% of these students used their AP Units to place out of at least one course and about 22% placed out of four or more courses. This means that many of our students never take, for instance, a history, mathematics, or science course during their years at BC. Anecdotal information from faculty doing academic advising indicates that our better students are the ones who replace four or more Core courses through Advanced Placement. Clearly, many of our better students take only Philosophy, Theology, and a course to fulfill the diversity requirement of the BC Core, because there are no AP exams in these subject areas. The UCT feels that this defeats the spirit and purpose of the Core, at least for many students. Although some of the students who place out of Core requirements may subsequently take a variety of elective courses across disciplines, many choose a narrow spectrum of courses in only one or two majors, or they take electives they feel will allow them to obtain a higher grade point average. The current AP policy also lowers the expectations of both students and faculty in Core classes by removing many of BC's better students from the Core curriculum.

The UCT found considerable confusion about how the policies regarding the use of AP Units are set. We fault no one in this regard, but we believe there needs to be greater clarity. The Admissions Office believes it is merely applying policies that have been set by individual academic departments and schools. However, faculty and departments seem to be under the impression that they do not have the option of saying that a particular AP Unit does not fulfill Core requirements in their subject. They seem to believe that for competitive reasons, Admissions insists that AP be accepted and that departments have at best only some flexibility in setting the qualifying score. The UCT found little evidence that departments have taken a careful and recent look at current high school AP courses or the AP exams. However, certainly many, if not most, faculty feel that a high school AP course and an exam score based upon a multiple-choice test is not equivalent to a BC Core course. And at least some faculty are uncomfortable with the implicit message that high-school teachers can fulfill the mission of the Core at least as well as BC faculty can. In a limited number of cases, such as in mathematics, the department has looked at the subsequent success rate of majors who have used AP Units to place out of the first required course for this major. The Math Department feels that these students have done well enough to justify allowing students to fulfill the mathematics Core requirement on the basis of the AP exam. However, since the students studied, i.e., math majors, are a self-selecting group, we wonder if this same conclusion can be applied to the greater population of non-major students who will never take a college mathematics course. Clearly more studies should be done in this regard in this and other departments.

It appears to be a widespread belief among faculty that BC needs to accept AP Units as fulfillment of Core courses if we are to attract the best high-school applicants. However, Mary French indicates that this is not true. Most students take AP courses in high school in order to prove that they are among the better students and to enhance their transcripts for college admissions. Some high schools even require that students take a

[1] Majors include Psychology, Political Science, International Studies, Computer Science, and History

certain number of AP courses in order to be recommended for college. Students are not taking AP courses to get out of college requirements. As Mary French indicated, many students are unaware that AP credit will allow them to waive our Core requirements until they arrive at BC. Thus, it seems that the most commonly heard reason as to why AP credit need be used for Core requirements doesn't actually hold.

Recommendations

In light of the above, the UCT calls for a reexamination of the use of AP credit at BC and in particular, its use to waive Core course requirements. The UCT calls upon the Provost's Office to coordinate such an effort with other pertinent bodies, such as the University Core Development Committee, the A&S Honors Program, the deans, and perhaps the EPC's of the various undergraduate schools. Since all requirements, including Core course requirements, are in the process of being reexamined and modified as the University shifts to a credit-based undergraduate graduation requirement, this is a particularly opportune time to look into this question and make modifications, if warranted. We recognize that modifying the use of AP exams by students to place out of Core curriculum courses will likely have resource implications, at least for some departments. Thus, any new requirements might need to be phased in over several years. However, overall the total number of student course enrollments will not change since AP Units do not count toward graduation. Given the basic premise of a liberal arts education at BC and the stated goals of the Core curriculum, the UCT feels that this is an important and timely issue.

As such, the UCT makes the following recommendations regarding AP credit at BC to the Provost for further study and potential action:

1. Conduct a careful and coordinated review of what is currently taught in AP courses in high school and of the material on the AP exams. This may need to be done by the appropriate departments with the help of the Admissions Office. In addition, review the other methods by which AP credit may be obtained by students, including "college courses" taught in high schools by high school teachers.

2. Limit the number of AP Units that can be used by any one student toward the 15 semester courses in the University core. The UCT discussed four or six as a possible maximum number. (In the partial survey done by Student Services, 22% of students had used AP Units to place out of four or more courses; 9% had used AP credits to place out of six or more courses.)

3. Make qualifying scores for Advanced Placement credit on all courses a five, not a four. This will eliminate about half of the students who now qualify for exemptions. It will also have the effect of placing BC nationally among the very top academic institutions. We recognize there would be significant resource implications in raising the qualifying scores for exemption from the writing requirement and from the foreign language requirements in those schools that have a language requirement. These implications would have to be weighed and addressed if the qualifying score in writing and foreign languages were to be raised to a five.

4a. Instead of having students who achieve a qualifying score place out of a Core course, require them to take a more advanced course in the same subject area. A corollary to this might be in areas where a number of subjects are available in

the Core, such as in the natural sciences. Here, we might allow the student a choice of an advanced course in the area of their AP or a Core course in another related subject. For instance, if a student were to AP out of chemistry, the student would have the choice of taking an advanced course in chemistry or a Core course in one of the other natural sciences. The problem with this approach, as brought up by Professor Cobb-Stevens, is that the more advanced courses are not specifically designed to meet Core criteria.

4b. In place of 4a, the UCT particularly recommends asking departments teaching in the Core to offer advanced "honors Core" courses open only to students who obtain a score of five on the relevant AP exams. Thus, a student with a five would not be able to place out of the Core, but would be eligible to *place into* an advanced Core course in this subject area. Students are thus rewarded for their work in high school and gain a bit of prestige. In addition, the UCT feels such classes would be popular and challenging for the faculty to teach. Such "honors Core" courses, like all Core courses, would require the approval of the University Core Development Committee.

Closing Statement

The University Core is a vital part of a BC education and is a key part of preparing our graduates to face the multiple challenges of the 21st century. The UCT sees the Core at BC as being diluted by an ever-increasing number of our students who place out of Core curriculum courses on the basis of AP exams or by other methods. As BC continues to attract more qualified students, this trend will increase and the central place of the Core in a BC education will be further threatened. Allowing students to avoid Core curriculum courses serves to narrow the focus and education of our students. It also takes many of our better students out of Core classes. The UCT therefore calls upon the Provost's Office to initiate a careful study of the use of Advanced Placement at Boston College and particularly its use by students for placing out of University Core courses. The Committee feels that this is an important and timely issue, particularly as undergraduate requirements are currently being reexamined in light of the new forthcoming credit-based graduation requirements.

Appendix 1
Boston College University Core Course Requirements

The following courses comprise the Core Curriculum and are required for all students entering Boston College:

- One course in Arts (Fine Arts, Music, Theatre)
- One course in Cultural Diversity (The Cultural Diversity requirement may be fulfilled by an appropriate course taken to fulfill another Core requirement, a major requirement, or an elective)
- Two courses in History (Modern History)
- One course in Writing
- One course in Literature (Classics, English, Germanic Studies, Romance Language and Literatures, Slavic and Eastern Languages)
- One course in Mathematics
- Two courses in Natural Science (Biology, Chemistry, Geology-Geophysics, Physics)
- Two courses in Social Science (Psychology in Education, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology)
- Two courses in Philosophy
- Two courses in Theology