



Study finds that more AP classes may not be better

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Many high school students pack their schedules with advanced placement classes as a way to boost their GPAs, enhance college applications and get a jump-start on credits toward an undergraduate degree.

But UNC's undergraduate admissions officers have found that taking more than five AP courses probably doesn't prepare students any better for college. This isn't what they expected to see, and their study has changed the way they look at college applications.

The original purpose of AP and International Baccalaureate programs was to prepare students to do college-level work, said Steve Farmer, vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions (pictured at right).

"But over time, it's moved away from that and become just a criterion in college admissions," he said. "We started seeing students with these superhuman course loads in high school – 10, 12, 15 AP courses. And we just assumed that if taking six courses was good, then taking 10 or 12 was better."

Farmer and Jen Kretchmar, senior assistant director for undergraduate admissions, started wondering whether more was really better. Kretchmar dug into the research that had already been done on how AP or IB courses relate to college performance.

There wasn't much out there, partly because it's a difficult question to study, and partly because few people had thought to ask it. "We came to feel like it was an untested assumption," Farmer said. "And it's a fairly high-stakes assumption for students, because admissions decisions hinge on these criteria."

They went to Chris Wiesen, an analyst at Carolina's Odum Institute, which helps social science researchers do rigorous data analysis. The institute has helped the Office of Undergraduate Admissions many times over the years to answer such questions as whether female applicants are favored over males (no) and whether applying for early action provides a better chance of getting in (it's not supposed to, but one year it did).

This time, they wanted to find out whether students who took more AP and IB courses had better GPAs in their first year at Carolina.

On average, people who take harder classes in high school may be better students already, so it's likely they'd have higher GPAs in college. To control for that, Kretchmar and Wiesen took into account SAT scores and high school grades.



They found that students who take more AP or IB courses do better in college – but only up to a certain point. If two students have similar SAT scores and high-school grades, and one takes zero AP courses and the other takes five, the student with five AP courses will probably have a higher first-year GPA (3.26 versus 3.07). But above five courses, there's no significant increase in GPA.

From now on, when Kretchmar and Farmer read applications, they won't be looking for more than five AP or IB courses. "There's no penalty for taking more than five," Farmer said, "but once you have five, you've jumped through the meaningful hoop, as far as we can see."

Starting with the 2013–14 admissions season, this is how the whole admissions staff reading applications plans to view AP and IB course loads.

So what will attract their attention in place of more AP classes? "That's what we're trying to work out," Farmer said. "We don't want to repeat the same mistake. We don't want to put more emphasis on SAT scores, for example, and then find out that beyond a certain number there's no correlation between the SAT score and better performance."

He expects that many high school students will keep taking lots of AP and IB courses because they're trying to get into several colleges, and other places won't change their admissions criteria just because Carolina does. The researchers have presented their findings to the College Board, which runs the AP program, and admissions officers at other schools have also been interested. But change in college admissions is slow, Farmer said.

"We operate on a lot of rituals and practices that have just been handed down to us. And a lot of them are pretty much unquestioned," he said.

One thing they hope is that more North Carolina schools will be convinced to start AP and IB programs, because the data do suggest that taking up to five of these courses leads to better college performance. And a student with up to five on the college application is a more attractive candidate at Carolina.

Taking more advanced classes because of an interest in the subject matter, though, is a good reason to load up on as many APs as a student wants, Farmer said.

"Interesting course? Great. Want to stay out of trouble? Great. Don't have anything better to do? Great, take more," he said. "But if you're doing it because you're assuming you're going to get bonus points with us, you're making the wrong decision. You won't."

By Susan Hardy, Division of Research