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“The Passing of the Test is Inconsequential:” Exploring the Relationship Between AP English Literature and Composition Courses and First-Year Composition Courses

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Abstract: Through the College Board’s Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature and Composition program many high school students can waive college requirements and earn credit for college courses if they receive passing scores on the AP examination. However, rather than receiving credit for a college literature course as the College Board recommends, many students with passing AP Literature and Composition exam scores receive credit for a first-year composition (FYC) course, which is a standard general education requirement for undergraduate students. While some institutions are altering their AP acceptance policies, because many students are still testing out of FYC courses, these courses and their corresponding AP courses and exams should be explored for content comparability. The speaker discusses the results from a case study of high school AP English Literature and Composition courses in Western Michigan. The extreme differences in course goals and writing assignments between the high schools’ and colleges’ courses suggest that AP English Literature and Composition courses are not equivalent to FYC courses. Furthermore, the AP English Literature and Composition examination tests writing skills that are not taught in FYC. Therefore, students who pass the AP English Literature and Composition exam should not receive credit or exemption from FYC courses. Instead, the speaker offers alternative actions colleges can take based on passing AP exam scores, such as changing their AP score acceptance policies and offering advanced or honors FYC classes for AP English Literature and Composition students.

Conclusion: Considering the goals of the AP courses and the minimal comparability between assignments given to AP and FYC students, I submit that APELC courses are not the equivalent of FYC courses. Giving students who pass the APELC Exam credit for FYC is not only incongruous with the FYC standards but is also hinders the improvement of students’ writing skills. As both AP and FYC instructors noted, the writing students are expected to perform on the AP exam is not the type of writing students will be using in their college courses; therefore, allowing students to progress without the knowledge and writing skills they will put students at a disadvantage when the time comes for them to produce college-level writing.

“’The purpose of the course is to expose them to an urban setting, to expose them to worlds they have not seen. And the passing of the test is inconsequential.’ ~High School Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Instructor

Even before an in-depth examination of the writing assignment coding scheme, there is a clear variance in writing assignments in the AP courses not seen in the FYC courses: in FYC courses, only two types of writing assignments were coded in one of six ways. The variety of writing assignments in AP courses may indicate AP courses are trying to cover a wider breadth of content, rather than going in-depth on specific skill sets. Such an interpretation is reasonable given that AP instructors are not only trying to prepare their students for the AP exam but also for college-level work. If the style of writing students use for timed essays is similar to what students in FYC courses are learning, then AP students should to continue practicing the timed essay format. However, AP instructors know timed writing skills will not transfer into students’ college-level writing. AP instructor Susan Jones says, “In honesty, we are teaching a test.”