



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Many Gifted Girls, Few Eminent Women

By Jay Mathews Washington Post Staff Writer

It is college visiting time. Many teenagers and their parents are crowding into university offices this summer to hear admissions directors speak lucidly of the joys of higher education. The college officials are very good at their jobs. They are well-educated, well-spoken and well-dressed. They give every sign of having the deepest understanding of the applicants and the high schools they come from.

So why is it that on one important issue--the relative worth of the advanced courses high school students are taking--they do not appear to have a clue?

In the last two decades two programs for college-level high school courses, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), have become a vital part of American secondary education and nearly indispensable for students applying to the most selective colleges. This year more than 800,000 AP students and more than 20,000 IB students in more than half of all U.S. high schools took examinations that are designed to earn them college credit.

Thankfully, college officials give great--and equal--weight to students who have taken either AP or IB courses in deciding whom to admit to their schools. The courses and tests, with thick reading lists and thought-provoking exams, prove that a student is not afraid of the intellectual demands of a university curriculum.

Yet most American colleges and universities are refusing to give even a bit of college credit for any of the difficult one-year IB courses, called Standard Level (SL) IB. At the same time, they are awarding credit for one-year AP courses that are no harder, and sometimes easier, than their IB equivalents.

Why is that? I have been on the planet more than half a century. I don't surprise very easily any more. But I continue to be stunned by the answers I receive when I ask university officials this question. The usual response is either "would you please explain to me what Standard Level is" or "I don't know" or "we made those rules several years ago and I don't know if anyone is left who can explain them."

This blithe ignorance, and the persistent unwillingness to do anything about it, forces many bright and hard-working high school students in IB programs to spend time and money on AP tests (at \$77 a pop) that they should not need to take. It is as if you walked into a bank with 20 of those new Sacajawea dollar coins -- all legal tender -- and were told by the teller that they looked kind of funny and thus could not be exchanged for a 20-dollar bill.

Consider the case of Jack Thirolf, about to start his senior year as an IB student at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville. Last year he took IB economics from Loren Baron, a splendid teacher. Thirolf got a 6 on the 7-point IB final, which includes both a test and a long paper. But in order to ensure college credit for his work, he also had to take the AP micro- and macro-economics

exams. His result on each was the top AP score, a 5. He said he thought the AP exams were not as difficult as the IB exam because they stuck with theory and did not get into the economics of developing countries.

This blatant discrimination against IB by colleges and universities has forced Richard Montgomery, one of the strongest IB schools in the world, to turn itself into a testing zoo each May. This year the school gave 532 IB exams and 961 AP exams, many of the latter duplicating what the IB tests had already assessed.

I am not sure why the IB administrators are so polite about this. Perhaps it is because the program is run out of Geneva by Europeans who assume, rightly or wrongly, that we Americans are always going to be thick-headed, and have to be introduced to reality slowly and gently. The IB officials in New York say they are doing their best to persuade colleges they should be treated the same as AP. "I get a lot of promises that it is going to change at x or y or z institution," said New York-based IB official Paul Campbell, "but moving a university bureaucracy forward is like filling a bathtub with an eye dropper."

He can say that again. The discriminatory policy dates back to 1973, when the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Student Credentials, a group representing several higher education associations, recommended that colleges award credit only for IB Higher Level (HL) examinations which take follow two-year courses, as many colleges now do, and not for the SL examinations that follow one-year courses. "We were being very cautious," said Cliff Sjogren, who was then chair of the council and director of admissions at the University of Michigan. Sjogren has served on the IB North America board of directors since then and now favors "more liberal, realistic" credit for IB.

There are other signs of myopia in U.S. college credit policies. Many universities give credit for only AP scores that are the equivalent of As, while giving their own freshmen the same credit for scraping by with a C-minus. Sjogren said this is because some colleges seem to think it enhances their academic reputations if they are tough on AP and IB credit. Also, they fear if they let too many bright freshman use AP or IB to skip introductory courses, there will not be enough work for graduate students who fund their educations as teaching assistants in Economics I or Introduction to Chemistry.

So this summer, college officials will be telling well-scrubbed high schoolers how wonderful it is for them to take challenging AP and IB high school courses, while simultaneously pursuing policies that diminish the worth of those courses.

AP and IB are valuable with or without credit. They teach how to think independently and how to discipline oneself. They inoculate students against the trauma of their first bad college exam. But that doesn't excuse the colleges' wrong-headedness in assigning credit.

I must confess, now that I am in such a righteous lather, that I have been just as dumb about IB credit as the college faculty and admissions officials I am excoriating. I have been writing about IB since 1997. But I did not understand, until a persistent Fairfax County parent, Anne Hall, explained it to me last month, that most colleges and universities do not give credit for SL exams.

Fortunately, there are some faint indications of change. A few admission directors, including John A. Blackburn at the University of Virginia, say they are revisiting the issue of credit for one-year IB courses. At Prince William County's Stonewall Jackson High School, which won national recognition this year from Time Magazine for its IB program, IB coordinator Connie Giorgio has found that James Madison University, Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth, Christopher Newport University and Washington College in Maryland give credit for SL exams. Charlotte Boucher, the IB coordinator at

Richard Montgomery, said the University of Maryland does the same. And many colleges give credit for SL exams to students who earn the full six-course IB diploma, which must include at least three HL courses.

IB official Campbell is having a meeting in Toronto this week with several admissions officers on the issue of discrimination against Standard Level exams. The Washington-based American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers plans further study, according to its associate executive director, Barmak Nassirian.

If you are visiting a college this summer, and have the urge to ask about AP and IB, go right ahead. The admissions officer will tell you how much she approves of both programs, and what benefits can come from indulging in academic rigor.

At that, you should nod and smile. But if you ask why her college has such odd rules about awarding credit, do not expect to get a very coherent answer. You should not hold that against her when you decide whether to favor her school with your presence. On this issue, most of America's great universities need a remedial education.

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