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Teaching the College Introductory Survey in the High School: Reaching out to AP U.S. History Teachers

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author was affiliated with the The College Board. Currently, Professor Michael C. Johanek is a Senior Fellow with the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract
The College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program now serves as a strong vehicle for promoting high academic standards, with college-level work for high school students. The product of a unique collaboration between high school teachers and college faculty dating back to the 1950s, AP is the de facto standard for academic programs that help students make the transition from high school to college. The recognition of AP as a program of academic excellence has, in turn, fueled a rapid expansion in the number of students taking the examinations. Last year, approximately 250,000 students took the Advanced Placement United States History examination. With this growth comes the continued twin challenges of maintaining high standards that correspond with advances in each discipline, and expanding access to these rigorous courses in much more equitable ways.

In this article we provide a brief overview of college faculty's involvement in the school-college collaboration that is AP, including the College Board's expanded efforts to strengthen its support to AP teachers.

Comments
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Mike Johanek, Uma Venkateswaran, Lawrence Charap

The College Board’s Advanced Placement (AP) program now serves as a strong vehicle for promoting high academic standards, with college-level work for high school students. The product of a unique collaboration between high school teachers and college faculty dating back to the 1950s, AP is the de facto standard for academic programs that help students make the transition from high school to college. The recognition of AP as a program of academic excellence has, in turn, fueled a rapid expansion in the number of students taking the examinations. Last year, approximately 250,000 students took the Advanced Placement United States History examination. With this growth comes the continued twin challenges of maintaining high standards that correspond with advances in each discipline, and expanding access to those rigorous courses in a more equitable way.

In this article we provide a brief overview of college faculty’s involvement in the school-college collaboration that is AP, including the College Board’s expanded efforts to strengthen its support to AP teachers.

Faculty Involvement in AP United States History

The AP U.S. history exam is three hours and ten minutes long and tests the knowledge and skills gained in a college level survey course through both multiple choice and essay questions. College faculty play a critical role in the following ways:

- Establishing the content domain for the examination
- Developing the examination
- Pretesting questions
- Grading the exams
- Providing current information on the Advanced Placement Program and the AP Examinations, AP Central features “best practices” teaching articles, lesson plans, curriculum units, online discussion groups, and announcements for AP workshops and Summer Institutes.

In addition to these efforts, College Board seeks to continue to learn more about AP teachers, and carries out regular research on AP teaching, including a broad forty-question survey of over thirty thousand teachers regarding their academic background and professional support needs. At present, we are in the midst of a study of AP U.S. History teachers and students, examining instructional practices in light of student performance patterns.

AP Central

One important component of the College Board’s professional development efforts is its web site for AP teachers, AP Central, launched in December 2001 (<http://www.apcentral.collegeboard.com>). The site currently has over two hundred thousand registered users, representing principals, AP coordinators, and college professors, as well as high school teachers. In addition to providing current information on the Advanced Placement Program and the AP Examinations, AP Central features “best practices” teaching articles, lesson plans, curriculum units, online discussion groups, and announcements for AP workshops and Summer Institutes.

The site puts teachers in touch with one another and keeps them informed of larger trends in teaching and research affecting their fields.

One important way that AP Central has created connections between AP teachers and higher education is through its Teachers’ Resource Catalog. This searchable database contains thousands of resources commonly used in the AP classroom and the college-level survey course. The review list in each course is drawn up by a content advisor and peer-reviewed by teachers and college faculty; the reviews themselves are written by veteran AP teachers and by college survey instructors. The reviews do not merely provide a synopsis of the content of a given textbook, video, web site, primary source, or other teaching tool; they discuss how it can actually be used in the AP classroom, whether as a student assignment or as background information for a teacher.

AP Central has also been a prime way to join the research community with the needs and interests of high school teachers. Collaboration agreements with professional organizations such as the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association have resulted in a series of “state of the field” pieces by leading scholars, discussing how recent developments in historical research will affect the teaching of the U.S. history survey course. College Board is also working with the National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian Institution to produce web, print and online resources for the use of artifacts in teaching the survey. Other innovative content development on the site—such as a series of U.S. history online lesson plans created by the Ohio State University’s Teaching Institute—presents teachers with an integrated package of sources and teaching materials about important topics in the AP classroom.

The site is also an ideal portal that allows teachers to connect with other professionals who have developed the survey course, such as the “Teaching and Textbook” column of the JAH, or a series of online teaching modules created by the Columbia American History Online project.

Collaboration with OAH

AP U.S. History has established a strong partnership with the OAH over the last couple of years through a number of initiatives. At the readings, OAH sponsors distinguished faculty who address the readers and share information about the OAH. The College Board distributes the OAH Magazine of History to over 8,000 AP U.S. History teachers at its workshops nationwide. More recently, we are proud to announce the formation of a Joint OAH/ AP Advisory Board on Teaching the U.S. History Survey Course. The Advisory Board consists of distinguished college and high school faculty who will guide efforts to strengthen the survey and provide resources to AP U.S. History teachers. Faculty involvement is critical to AP and it is our hope that these initiatives will strengthen the ties between AP and the academic community.

Michael Johanek received his doctorate in U.S. history from Columbia University and is Executive Director of K-12 Professional Development at the College Board; Uma Venkateswaran received her doctorate in U.S. history from Case Western Reserve University and is Assessment Specialist, History and Social Sciences of Educational Testing Service; and Lawrence Charap received his doctorate in U.S. history from Johns Hopkins University and is Head of the Humanities and Social Science Group at the College Board.