



College credit based on AP scores

Executive Summary

The [Advanced Placement](#) (AP) Program allows high school students to take college-level courses with the potential to earn college credit based on their performance on a standardized AP exam. Missouri currently allows institutions to determine their own policies regarding credit and placement for students with AP scores. [House Bill 1683](#), filed in 2022, would require in-state public institutions of higher education to grant undergraduate course credit for scores of 3 or higher.

Highlights

- At least 30 states currently require state postsecondary institutions to award college credit for AP scores at or above a specific threshold (usually ≥ 3).
- Higher AP test scores are associated with better college course performance and on-time completion rates.
- Although participation of low-income, Black, and Hispanic students in AP courses has increased over the past twenty years, there remain differences in AP participation in specific subject areas (e.g., computer science).
- Rural schools tend to offer fewer AP courses than urban and suburban schools.
- The cost of AP tests can be a barrier to low-income students receiving college credit from their high school coursework.

Limitations

- Because of disparities in access to AP courses, it is difficult to directly connect trends in college performance to AP scores in some cases.

Research Background

AP exam scores and subject mastery

High school students have the option to take a nationally standardized exam after completing a college-level AP course. AP scores range from 1 to 5 and are meant to represent how qualified a student is to receive college credit in a particular subject (**Figure 1**).¹ The College Board and the American Council on Education (ACE) recommend that institutions grant credit to students who earn a score of 3 or higher.²

A recent study of college course performance across a range of subjects—chemistry, government, English, environmental science, physics, Spanish, and history—suggests that students who place out of introductory courses with an AP score of 3 or higher do as well, if not

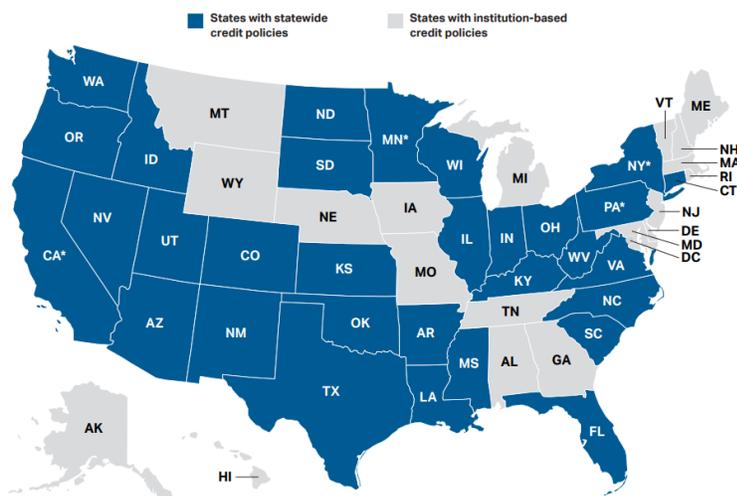
better, in an advanced course than their classmates who took the introductory course at the postsecondary institution.³ The largest difference in course performance was found between students who scored a 5 on the AP exam and those who did not take the AP exam. These results are consistent with previous studies, also performed by the College Board, which suggest that AP scores of 3 or higher are typically good indicators for student performance in advanced courses, where higher AP scores are associated with the strongest performance effects.³

AP Exam Score	Recommendation	College Course Grade Equivalent
5	Extremely well qualified	A+ or A
4	Very well qualified	A-, B+, or B
3	Qualified	B-, C+, or C
2	Possibly qualified	---
1	No recommendation	---

Figure 1. AP Score Scale. Recommendations by the College Board as to how qualified a student is to receive college credit based on their AP score and what each score represents in a college course letter grade.¹

State and institutional thresholds for AP course credit

Postsecondary institutions can set their own standards for AP credit in accordance with state policies. At least 30 states currently require state postsecondary institutions to award credit for AP scores at or above a specific threshold (**Figure 2**).⁴ While the specific guidelines vary across states, most states that set laws related to minimum AP scores (e.g., OH, FL, KY) require that institutions offer introductory course credit to students who earn a 3 or higher.^{5,6} Among public



*Starred states have one or more systemwide AP credit policies.

and private institutions (two- and four-year) in states bordering Missouri, around two-thirds of all schools currently offer credit for AP scores of 3 or higher in common AP course subjects (e.g., U.S. History, English Language & Composition).⁷

Figure 2. AP credit policies in the United States. States with statewide AP credit policies (blue) and institution-based AP credit policies (gray) as of Fall 2020.

Course Credit for AP Scores in Missouri

Missouri institutions currently determine their own policies regarding credit and placement for students with AP scores. Depending upon the AP exam, the minimum score required to receive course credit ranges from 3–5 and the equivalent college course varies. For example, Missouri State University offers course credit to students who receive a 3, 4, or 5 on the AP Chemistry exam. However, scores of 3 are considered to be equivalent to five credit hours of CHM 116/117, while scores of 5 are worth nine credit hours of higher-level chemistry courses (CHM 160/161/170/171).

Higher education outcomes associated with AP credits

Several studies have explored the relationship between AP courses and college outcomes. Similar to the effects observed for dual enrollment students, there is evidence that AP credit can increase the probability of on-time or early college completion.^{8,9} Students who receive AP course credit are also more likely to participate in advanced coursework.^{9,10} A recent study found that female students who earn AP credit from STEM-related AP exams take higher-level STEM courses in college.¹⁰ These effects weren't observed in male students with AP credit, suggesting that AP credit may be one tool to reduce the male-female gap in STEM.

Access to AP courses

Income, race, and geography can be barriers to accessing the academic benefits of AP course completion and high AP test scores.¹¹ Rural high schools, for example, are less likely to offer AP courses to their students. Further, while participation of low-income, Black and Hispanic students in AP courses has increased over the past 20 years, there remain differences in AP participation in specific subject areas (e.g., computer science). The cost of taking an AP test (currently \$96/exam) can also prevent low-income students from taking the AP test at the end of an AP course.¹² Because structural factors impact whether or not a student can participate in and receive credit for a high-quality AP course, there is some ambiguity as to how much the courses themselves prepare students for college compared to other predictors (e.g., student motivation, school resources, teacher quality).

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