

High GPAs without rigor are meaningless

Guest column by Raymund A. Paredes, Ph.D.

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In the 2007 legislative session, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) was charged with developing a method of calculating the grade point averages of Texas high school students for use in admission decisions at state universities. Recently, editorial staff at an area newspaper took exception to my early conclusions on the matter. One of their readers later wrote in and accused me of “dumbing down” Texas education and reported wondering out loud if I was “completely nuts.”

The source of this agitation is my expressed concern about the practice in some Texas high schools of giving extra grade-point credit to certain courses labeled “pre-Advanced Placement.” There are no statewide standards for such courses and they vary widely in quality and rigor. Selective universities around the country almost never give weighted credit to pre-AP courses and, in a recent meeting of admission directors and officers from Texas public universities hosted by THECB staff, the consensus was against bonus points for pre-AP courses. This was mostly because of the absence of consistent standards but also because the admissions officers felt that receiving bonus points for actual AP courses, which will be weighted and are standardized, should be incentive enough to take pre-AP. Rigor in pre-AP courses is a genuine concern. I recently received a letter from a pre-AP English teacher who argued passionately for the extra effort of her students who were required to read two novels over the summer and thus far in the academic year had “annotated” the two novels. However, research shows that children must read steadily over the summer—typically, five books or more—simply to maintain prior reading levels. As a university English professor for 30 years, I can say that, whatever the merits of annotation, we prefer that students come to our beginning classes with ample experience in writing sustained, thoughtful and lucid essays.

The argument for extra credit for pre-AP that was expressed in the editorial and echoed by some critics is that without this incentive, students will not take rigorous courses but simply inflate their GPAs by taking, as one teacher put it, the “regular, easy” courses. This strikes me as an argument that misses the larger issue: what we need to do in Texas is not create artificial incentives for students to take rigorous courses but establish rigor across the entire high school curriculum. The evidence for this strategy is overwhelming. ACT, which tests over 70,000 Texas students every year, concludes that only 20 percent of Texas high school graduates are college-ready. THECB data show that 50 percent of entering Texas college students require remedial education and a just-released report by a coalition of Texas business leaders and education reformers calls for much higher levels of rigor in our schools. A recent national report by the Strong American Schools organization carries the title “Diploma to Nowhere”

and warns that American high schools “profoundly fail” to prepare students for post-secondary work. The report further notes that nearly 80 percent of college students who required remediation had a B average or higher in high school. Let me be clear: if Texans want our state to be nationally and globally competitive and if we wish to assure a high quality of life for future generations, we must not give our children a choice between rigorous courses and “easy” ones. All courses should be rigorous and we should give bonuses to students only for doing well in courses of demonstrable exceptional rigor such as actual AP courses. This is not “dumbing down” but the opposite.

The College Board, which administers the AP program, takes the sensible position that its pre-AP instructional practices and content should be imbedded in all courses prior to AP and warns that designating only certain courses as “pre-AP” can lead to “tracking,” a practice through which only a minority of students are exposed to rigorous courses and the rest, often poor, often students of color, are left to languish in courses that lead to nowhere. This is at odds with every fundamental principle of American democracy.

The newspaper editorial was correct in its assertion that many parents (and students, for that matter) are more concerned about high GPAs than they are about the quality of education and the preparation it provides for life beyond high school. Parents and students need to understand that high GPAs without rigor are meaningless. Just think of all those B students in college remediation courses.

At an October 22 meeting of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, I will make a final recommendation regarding the calculation of high school GPA for admission to Texas universities. As a result of recent meetings with educators, parents and other interested parties, my colleagues and I have already adjusted some preliminary recommendations; for example, we have sharpened language to assure that the critical role of the arts is considered in the GPA calculation. Over the next several weeks, we will consider further adjustments, all with one goal in mind: how to calculate GPA in a manner that promotes excellence and rigor for all Texas youngsters.

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