

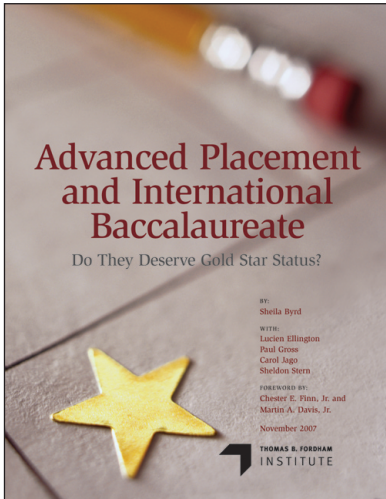


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THOMAS B. FORDHAM
INSTITUTE

DO AP AND IB REACH THE GOLD STANDARD?



Over the ten years of Fordham's modern existence, we have panned vigorously for gold—curricular gold. This quest has frequently left us disappointed, as our reviews of state standards have consistently shown that expectations for American primary and secondary students are typically weak and watered down. This has been especially the case with high schools. Recently, however, there has been a proliferation in high school students taking courses offering rigorous pre-college curriculum. In particular, enrollment in the Advanced Placement (AP) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs have skyrocketed

Fordham's latest report, "Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?" by Sheila Byrd, examines whether the reputation the programs have for academic excellence is truly

deserved. Our expert reviewers looked at the four AP and IB courses most similar to the core content areas in American high schools—English, history, math, and science—and found that, in general, the courses do warrant praise. In a few cases, they deserve gold stars.

"Although there are problems with some of their curricula, such as math, AP and IB programs offer something very much needed in today's secondary education system: high academic standards combined with rigorous exams aligned to those standards," said Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. "Students are also expected to make sense of complex, and sometimes contradictory, materials; to write and defend their opinions about these materials intelligently; and to apply their knowledge in creative and productive ways. These are all skills that will serve them well in later years—and that should find their way into state standards, too."

The report graded the overall effectiveness of the four core content areas:

- The AP and IB biology courses scored an A- and A
- The AP and IB English courses scored a B+ and B+
- The AP and IB history courses scored a B- and B-
- The AP and IB math courses scored a C+ and B-

For a full copy of the report, click [here](#).



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Table 1: Grades for Advanced Placement Courses

Advanced Placement Course	Grades by Criterion	Overall Grade	Strengths and Weaknesses
AP English Literature and Composition	Content (60%) B+ Rigor (30%) A Clarity (10%) B-	B+	<p>STRENGTHS: Rigorous and comprehensive exam; “Formalist” approach to writing</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: Curricular expectations tentative, must be discovered by teachers; the teacher’s guide, once the user actually finds it, is difficult to navigate.</p>
AP Calculus AB	Content (60%) C Rigor* (30%) C <i>*includes mathematical reasoning</i> Clarity (10%) B	C+	<p>STRENGTHS: Course description clearly written; exam well-crafted and aligned to curriculum</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: Missing or abridged topics of importance; overreliance on technology, resulting in a de-emphasis on analytical skills</p>
AP U.S. History	Content (60%) B- Rigor (30%) B- Clarity (10%) B-	B-	<p>STRENGTHS: Demanding, well-constructed, content-rich exam</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: Unifying themes are tendentious, emphasizing <i>pluribus</i> instead of <i>unum</i>; topics mention very few actual historical events; sample syllabi disconnected from course description</p>
AP Biology	Content (60%) A- Rigor (30%) B Clarity (10%) A	A-	<p>STRENGTHS: Course description is specific and straightforward; demanding exam assesses conceptual understanding, but is also content-rich</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: Exam content more shallow than an introductory biology class for majors at research universities</p>



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Table 2: Grades for International Baccalaureate Courses

International Baccalaureate Course	Grades by Criterion	Overall Grade	Strengths and Weaknesses
Language A English SL	Content (60%) B Rigor (30%) A Clarity (10%) A	B +	<p>STRENGTHS: Rigorous and comprehensive exam; detailed and rigorous expectations for literary analysis skills</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: U.S. students in IB programs might miss exposure to core U.S. literature</p>
Math SL	Content (60%) B- Rigor* (30%) C <i>*includes mathematical reasoning</i> Clarity (10%) B	B-	<p>STRENGTHS: Curriculum guide clearly written; rigorous, comprehensive assessments</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: Reliance on technology, resulting in a de-emphasis on analytical skills; some important pre-university content missing</p>
World History SL	Content (60%) C Rigor (30%) A Clarity (10%) B	B-	<p>STRENGTHS: Demanding, well-constructed, content-rich exams; strong content within the narrowly defined course parameters</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: U.S. students in IB programs could miss exposure to almost all core U.S. History content; even as a <i>world</i> history course, its 20th-century focus is too narrow; lacks emphasis on important chronological knowledge</p>
Biology SL	Content (60%) A + Rigor (30%) A + Clarity (10%) C	A	<p>STRENGTHS: Depth and coverage of content in curriculum guide; comprehensive assessment system</p> <p>WEAKNESSES: “Systematization” of the program could confuse or overwhelm teachers or stifle curricular inventiveness</p>