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Harvard study: Are weighted AP grades fair?

By Valerie Strauss

My guest is Debra Viadero, associate editor of [Education Week](#) who writes a blog for that publication called [Inside School Research](#).

By Debra Viadero

To encourage high school students to tackle tougher academic classes, many schools assign bonus points to grades in [Advanced Placement](#) or honors courses. But schools' policies on whether students should receive a grade-point boost and by how much are all over the map.

My local public school district, for instance, used to add an extra third of a grade-point to students' AP course grades while the private high school on the other side of town would bump up students' grades by a full letter grade.

Since students from both schools would be applying to many of the same colleges, and essentially competing with one another, it didn't seem fair to me that the private school kids should get such a generous grade boost.

That's why I was heartened to come across a new study by a Harvard University researcher that takes a more systematic look at the practice of high school grade-weighting.

For his study, [Phillip Sadler](#) asked college students in 113 introductory-level physics, biology, and chemistry classes across the country about the level of science classes they took in high school and the grades they received in them. He then compared those numbers with the grades those students were getting in their college science classes in the same subject.

He found that for every increasing level of rigor in high school science, students' college course grades rose by an average of 2.4 points on a 100-point scale, where an A is 95 points and a B is worth 85 points and so on. In other words, the college grade for the former AP chemistry student would be expected to be 2.4 points higher than that of the typical student who took honors chemistry in high school. And the honors students' college grade, in turn, would be 2.4 points higher than that of the student who took regular chemistry.

Translating those numbers, and some other calculations, to a typical high school 1-to-4-point grade scale, Sadler estimates that students taking an honors science class in high school ought to get an extra half a point for their trouble, and that a B in an AP science course ought to be counted as an A for the purpose of high school grade-point averages.

But his findings also justify giving AP students who pass the AP exam 2 bonus points, which I'm guessing is not currently a common practice.

Sadler said his study may be the first to offer some empirical justification for assigning weights to grades in tougher high school classes. The [College Board](#), which administers the AP program, says he is probably right on that point, though it makes no recommendations itself on what schools should do with regard to bonus points.

But Sadler offers a word of warning, too: Many schools, especially those in low-income and rural communities, can't offer as many--or even any--AP classes. The fact that AP- and honors-course takers are getting hefty grade boosts could handicap those more disadvantaged students in the college-admissions game--unless colleges take into account the degree to which students had opportunities to do more-rigorous coursework.

You can find this study, and a collection of other new studies on the AP program in "AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program," which will be published later this month by [Harvard Education Press](#). It fills a much-needed hole in the research base on an increasingly popular education program.

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