

Online College Prep Classes Fail to Close Academic Gap

DH-2000079 E1

☆☆☆☆ San Francisco Chronicle A15

By Tanya Schevitz
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

MONDAY, MAY 15, 2000

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Results Disappointing for Online College Prep Classes

► SCHOOLS

From Page 1

Balboa High School sophomore Martha Medina was getting top grades, joined the debate team, volunteered in a service society and was active in the Latino club.

But she still was worried that she would not be able to get into the college of her choice because her San Francisco school did not offer enough advanced placement college-prep classes.

"I thought it would hurt me academically and no good college

ing results for some schools that cannot afford a full menu of advanced placement offerings.

Some students say they like the flexibility of working on their own, but many find it too difficult to work through the material alone and say the professors and resources available online do not always do the job.

Besides gaining an advantage in the college admissions process, students who take advanced placement

classes and pass formal credit exams would want me," said Medina, 16.

Hoping to allay such fears, the University of California began offering classes, which saves students time and money while working toward a degree.

But without a teacher to guide her, Medina had trouble with the first students logged on, the online lessons, and she struggled offerings are producing disappointment with the school's computers, which were slow and difficult for her to master.

"I couldn't understand," she said. "I would ask my mom, and she wouldn't know. I read the chapters over three or four times, and I still wouldn't understand."

She finally dropped the course after a few weeks. Other classmates did the same. By the time the advanced placement credit exams began last week, only one Balboa High student remained in the online program out of the seven who signed up in January.

High Rate of Online Dropouts

School officials report a high proportion of dropouts statewide in the 33 schools that enrolled in the special online program. Of 240 students who enrolled in January, nearly 50 were gone within the first three weeks, and 10 more have dropped out since then.

The disappointing results further complicate the admissions process in California's public universities two years after the state banned affirmative action.



ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Donald Bursey, a junior at Balboa High School in S.F., is the one remaining student at the school who signed up for an online advanced placement class.

In California, 81,000 students attend 131 public high schools with no advanced placement courses. Forty-eight other schools enrolling an additional 62,000 students offer only one subject.

At the other extreme, 84 public high schools have 19 or more college prep subjects. Critics of the school system say enrollment at 71 percent of those schools is 50 percent or more Asian American and Caucasian.

"The poor, the African Americans, the Latinos don't even get off the starting line when it comes to competing," said Mark Rosenbaum, the legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, which has sued to improve access to the state's premier colleges.

Colleges rate the quality of a high school's curriculum in part by the number of college placement programs offered. Students who take the classes are often granted extra points on their grade point averages, allowing straight-A students in the

right schools a chance to push their averages above a perfect 4.0.

Suing UC Berkeley

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund sued the University of California at Berkeley last year on behalf of 800 students who had straight As and were not admitted.

"You could have a student with a 4.0 who is excellent who never had an opportunity to get to a 4.6. Their GPA will never be able to match students who have access to AP (advanced placement) classes," said Maria Blanco, regional counsel for the Mexican American association.

Critics say the bias against students in underserved schools will continue until enough trained teachers and other resources are in place. It costs an estimated \$20,000 to start a single quality course.

"Anything short of that is cosmetic and is doomed to failure," Rosenbaum said. "Access to a computer doesn't correct the gross disparity in availability of AP courses and substi-

FEWER OPPORTUNITIES FOR MINORITY STUDENTS

Schools with a higher percentage of minority enrollment offer fewer advanced placement classes than schools with predominantly white enrollment. Here are selected Bay Area high schools, showing minority enrollment (excluding Asians) and number of advanced placement (AP) courses offered.

County	District	School	Enrollment	Percent minority*	AP classes	AP subjects	AP classes per 1,000 students
Alameda	Oakland Unified	Castlemont	1,786	93.5%	0	0	0
Contra Costa	Acalanes Union	Acalanes	1,328	6.2	16	8	12.0
	Mount Diablo Unified	Ygnacio Valley	1,629	34.0	7	4	4.3
San Francisco	San Francisco Unified	Balboa	1,222	78.9	2	2	1.6
	San Francisco Unified	Lowell	2,527	21.1	31	17	12.3
	San Francisco Unified	Mission	900	71.2	1	1	1.1
San Mateo	Jefferson Union	Jefferson	1,410	93.1	2	2	1.4
	San Mateo Union	Hillsdale	1,279	27.2	11	8	8.6
Santa Clara	Palo Alto Unified	Palo Alto	1,489	12.7	26	8	17.5
	San Jose Unified	San Jose High Academy	977	63.8	0	0	0

Source: ACLU Foundation of Southern California; data for 1998-99 school year

*Excluding Asians

Chronicle Graphic

tutes virtual education for real education."

Bill to Create Courses

A bill by state Sen. Martha Escutia, D-Huntington Beach, calls for at least \$20.5 million to be used for every high school to create a minimum of one course by September and four courses by 2001. The proposal includes \$5 million for tutors and training for teachers.

The University of California also is working to address the problem, offering online algebra courses to hundreds of students in Salinas and Santa Cruz to prepare them for higher-level mathematics classes.

Elaine Wheeler, director of the UC program, said administrators recognized from the start that taking the courses online would be a challenge. She said the dropout rate is comparable to that of a traditional advanced placement class.

"They are difficult, and it does require quite a bit of organization and time," she said.

She said students will be strongly encouraged next year to take the classes as part of their regular schedule instead of as an extra class.

Hiring Local Teachers to Help

Having also learned this past year that students need more support, UC will hire local teachers or counselors to work with the students and will provide college and graduate students to serve as telephone and online mentors. It is also providing 200 California teachers with four days of special training.

Wheeler said the online program will never replace the need for a trained teacher in a classroom. But where schools cannot provide that, the online program offers students an opportunity they otherwise would not have.

The online program can be a good match for students who are motivated and work well alone.

Julie Coghlan, coordinator of a college prep program at McAtter

High School in San Francisco, said the five students who signed up for a macroeconomics course are still at it, preparing for the test this week. They are taking the online class during a regular school period with the help of an economics teacher.

Coghlan said the students were not from underrepresented minorities, and in fact, they were carefully screened to make sure those who were chosen would succeed.

At Balboa High School, junior Donald Bursey, 16, who wants to be a robotics engineer, is the one remaining student in the online class. He is also taking an advanced placement calculus course at the school and said he would be taking other courses if they were available.

"I prefer the online class because I can do the work anytime," he said. "They tell you what work you have to do, and if you have questions, you can e-mail the professor." As yet, he has not needed the help.