

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Test of Online Advanced Placement Courses Gets Mixed Reviews

BY SARAH CARR

HIGH-SCHOOL OFFICIALS in California who offered online Advanced Placement courses to students over the past year give their experiences mixed reviews.

The courses, offered through the University of California College Preparatory Initiative, were an effort to level the playing field for the state's high-school students by

providing online A.P. courses to schools that would not be able to offer A.P. courses otherwise.

Over the past year, the university offered courses such as microeconomics and calculus to students in 35 high schools, according to Elaine Wheeler, the project's director. Students use e-mail to communicate with instructors, who may be anywhere in the state.

While the courses appear to be a boon for motivated students, some high-school officials say that both students and teachers invested more time in the courses than had been expected.

'A CHALLENGE' FOR STUDENTS

"It is a challenge, but all five of our students who started completed the program," says Julie Cogh-

lan, coordinator of the college-preparatory program at McAteer High School in San Francisco.

All five students took an A.P. macroeconomics course, and Ms. Coghlan attributes their success to the structure and support they were given at McAteer. The students were assigned a period during the day to work on the online course, and the school's economics teacher was available to assist them.

At Balboa High School in San Francisco, however, only one out of the seven students who began it completed an online A.P. course in chemistry.

"We didn't know when we committed to this that we really needed to have this as a core part of the students' day, and not as an add-on," says Ted Barone, the assistant principal for curriculum and instruction at Balboa. "The students already have a full set of classes, and then to add an Advanced Placement course on top of that, it was really shooting holes in the ship before it left dry dock."

HIRING AN INSTRUCTOR

Mr. Barone says Balboa would be better off hiring an instructor to teach the course face to face than it would be offering the online version again.

But Janet Johnson, the assistant principal at Bell Gardens High

School, outside Los Angeles, says she plans to use the program again next year. At Bell Gardens all eight of the students who started a microeconomics course finished it and took the exam.

Ms. Johnson says the A.P. courses help prepare students for college-level work, which they'll have to be able to handle independently. She adds, though, that students taking the courses are much more likely to succeed if high schools assign on-site staff members to help them out. "The stu-

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dents really need close supervision."

Ms. Wheeler, the project's director, estimates that of the 204 students who started the online program this September, nearly a third dropped out. She says that University of California officials believe the program has been successful, and that they plan to expand it next year.

But there have been unanticipated challenges. "The real challenge has been that the students do need some amount of local support at the schools in order to get through the courses," she says.