

NEWMAN SOCIETY REVIEW

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Analysis of Advanced Placement Courses

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The following is part of The Cardinal Newman Society’s series of analyses of secular materials and programs used in Catholic education. Such materials and programs must be carefully evaluated to determine if their underlying philosophy, content, and activities are aligned to the mission of Catholic education and, if used, what adaptations might be needed.

The Newman Society’s “Policy Guidance Related to Secular Materials and Programs in Catholic Education” offers a framework for such evaluation and is the basis for this particular analysis.

Overview

The College Board currently has 38 Advanced Placement (AP) Courses for schools to choose from,¹ leading to exams in May. Some colleges will award credit toward an undergraduate degree if a student’s exam score is high enough.

The benefits of AP courses are sometimes exaggerated. College credit for a good exam score is not guaranteed and eighty-six percent (86%) of the top 153 U.S. colleges ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* restrict the credit awarded.² Additionally, research suggests there is no correlation between taking AP courses and success in college.³ And students can sit for the exams without ever taking an approved course.

Nevertheless, some educators and parents are attracted to potential college savings and the rigor of AP courses, which suggests academic seriousness. The academic value deserves to be scrutinized: while the workload is heavy and the amount of information is often very large in AP

¹ See <https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/apcourse> (accessed on June 6, 2020).

² Kelli B. Grant, “Study Up: Scoring AP Credit for College Isn’t Easy,” CNBC (May 4, 2017) at <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/04/study-up-scoring-ap-credit-for-college-isnt-easy.html> (accessed on June 6, 2020).

³ See <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/role-advanced-placement-and-honors-courses-college-admissions> (accessed on June 12, 2020).

courses, this emphasis may not allow much time for valuable classroom dialogue and critical analysis of the material. Students and teachers may have little time to focus on cultivating good habits of judgment and reasoning. AP course emphasis on skill development or memorization may prevent substantial integration of Catholic teaching, culture, worldview, and anthropology.

To carry the AP label, a course must meet the College Board’s institutional standards—especially the inclusion of a host of names, dates, concepts, events, and critical skill sets—but there is flexibility with instructional approaches and content selection. If a Catholic educator plans judiciously and carefully, it is possible to infuse an AP course with material and approaches to conform it to the mission of Catholic education. A school should carefully monitor whether this supplementary teaching is sufficient for a serious Catholic education, which demands substantial effort.

Recommendations

- Begin with the mission of Catholic education in mind, which recognizes Christ as the foundation of the school.
- Incorporate the Newman Society’s *Catholic Curriculum Standards* into the academic discipline, then include the AP standards.
- Since AP does *not* prescribe the specific use of texts or textbooks, carefully select these materials to ensure their alignment with the mission of Catholic education and the presentation of a Catholic worldview or perspective while aligning with AP requirements.
- Consult the course descriptions and class syllabi of faithful Catholic schools⁴ and colleges⁵ for ideas on texts and textbooks.
- Materials including or espousing political or social activism (history, literature, science, and so forth) should be used with care, ensuring that the principles of Catholic social teachings are taught, compared, and understood.
- Books should not be taught simply because they are “on an AP recommended list.” Choose the books that best fulfill the course objectives and allow for the presentation of a Catholic worldview.
- For AP literature classes, closely follow The Cardinal Newman Society’s “Policy Guide Related to Literature and the Arts in Catholic Education.” This can help ensure that the selected works aid the student in a right ordering of the imagination, passions, and emotions

⁴ See <https://newmansociety.org/catholic-ed-honor-roll/>.

⁵ See <https://newmansociety.org/the-newman-guide/recommended-colleges/>.

and allow for teacher-led evaluation of content in terms of Catholic norms, values, and worldview.

- Be aware that the AP World History exam is focused on history after 1200.⁶ Ensure that adequate coverage of pre-history and the ancient world is required in the curriculum to avoid historical gaps.
- Avoid an over-emphasis on the memorization of dates, names, and events. Take concrete steps to ensure that the “story” in history and man’s place in the world remains in focus. The use of the *Catholic Curriculum Standards* and its taxonomy for questioning will help toward this end.
- Ensure that the course is not just focused on teaching to the AP test. Deep and meaningful learning must not give way to extensive but shallow reading and memorization done for test purposes only. Focus should be on the intrinsic value and wonder of the academic discipline, cultivating habits of good reasoning, and evangelization. The pursuit of the true, good, and beautiful⁷ is what motivates and inspires the academic enterprise in a Catholic school. Our mission is to educate and inspire; it is not simply to deliver advanced college credit. The credit should not lead but will likely follow.
- Ensure that the instructor is both a content expert and a knowledgeable and practicing Catholic who can impart an engaging Catholic worldview related to the discipline.

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⁶ Colleen Flaherty, “More Criticism of AP World History Timeline,” Inside Higher Ed (July 25, 2018) at <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/07/25/more-criticism-ap-world-history-timeline> (accessed on June 12, 2020).

⁷ Dan Guernsey, “Educating to Truth, Beauty and Goodness” (Oct. 17, 2016) at <https://newmansociety.org/educating-truth-beauty-goodness-2/> (accessed on June 12, 2020).