The Role of College Prep Course Offerings and Course-Taking in Long-Term Educational Outcomes

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This report examined college prep course offerings and course-taking in Texas. Results showed more college prep courses were offered at larger, urban and suburban schools with high levels of academic achievement and low levels of economic disadvantage. When schools offered more college prep courses, students took more of them. Furthermore, when students took more college prep courses, they were more likely to complete a postsecondary credential or bachelor’s degree within 12 years of high school graduation.

The role of college prep course offerings and course-taking differed by student achievement level. More course offerings increased gaps in course-taking between high- and low-achieving students. In contrast, more course-taking reduced gaps in college completion between high- and low-achieving students.


Key Findings

- Schools that offered more college prep courses were larger, urban or suburban, had more high-achieving students, and fewer economically disadvantaged students.
- Offering more college prep courses increased college prep course-taking only slightly.
- Taking more college prep courses increased postsecondary attainment. Each additional college prep course increased postsecondary credential completion by 0-1 percentage points and bachelor’s degree completion by 1-2 percentage points.

Source: Figure 4, Panel A in full report.
Note: College prep courses were defined as the number of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and other advanced courses, as outlined by the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), taken in high school.
Figure 2. Relationship between Earning a Postsecondary Credential & College Prep Course-Taking by 8th Grade Test Scores

Source: Figure 6, Panel A in full report.
Note: Test scores were an average of reading, mathematics, social studies, science, and writing scores from the 8th grade Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), reported in standard deviation units.

Recommendations

1: Since it may not be cost-effective for schools to dramatically increase college prep course offerings with the goal of increasing course-taking, schools should consider encouraging students to take more of the college prep courses already offered and gradually increasing course offerings as more students enroll in them.

2: Students, particularly those who are low-achieving, should be encouraged to enroll in college prep courses and more of them.

3: Since some students will be less prepared for the rigor of college prep courses than others, schools should ensure students are introduced to pre-college prep coursework (i.e., pre-AP, pre-IB) in middle school and early in high school. They should also identify novel instructional strategies or academic support systems to ensure low-achieving students taking these courses can be successful.

- The role of college prep course offerings on course-taking varied by student achievement. When more college prep courses were offered, high-achieving students enrolled in more of them, but low-achieving students did not.

- The role of college prep course-taking on postsecondary outcomes varied by student achievement. Low-achieving students benefitted the most from taking additional college prep courses. Their likelihood of completing a postsecondary credential increased as they took more of them, and at high levels of course-taking, they caught up to their high-achieving peers.