




Bridging the Equity Gap in Advanced Placement[®] Education



Today, longstanding inequities in education persist across socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial lines, preventing students from lower-income households, predominantly Black and Hispanic, from reaping the benefits of higher education. This equity gap continues to place these students at a disadvantage by limiting their participation in Advanced Placement® (AP®) education, making the transition from high school to college more difficult.

That's why all of us operating in education have a shared responsibility to be part of the solution in closing the equity gap in college readiness. To that end, it is worth taking a deeper look at the equity gap in AP education and exploring potential solutions toward bridging the gap.

THE EDUCATION EQUITY GAP: BY THE NUMBERS

An educational equity gap refers to a “significant and persistent disparity in educational attainment between different groups of students.” Several education-centric institutions and organizations have researched the equity gap in education. Their findings paint a less than optimistic picture.

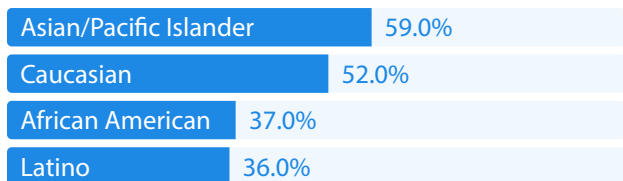
According to Higher Learning Advocates, the equity gap in higher education between white students and students of color [manifests in K-12 education](#), where “87 percent of white students graduate high school on time compared to 76 percent of Hispanic and 73 percent of African American students.”

Student participation and progression in higher education varies by race and ethnicity — from enrollment to persistence to completion. Below is a breakdown by the numbers:

Enrollment:

In 2018, the college enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-olds was as follows:

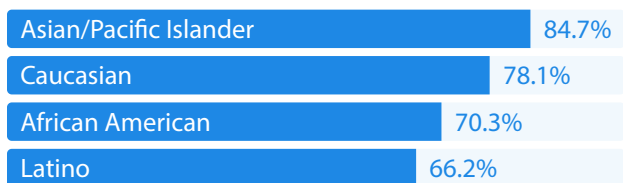
Source: [National Center for Education Statistics: College Graduation Rates](#)



Persistence:

Among students who enrolled in college in 2017, the percentage of students who returned for a second year was as follows:

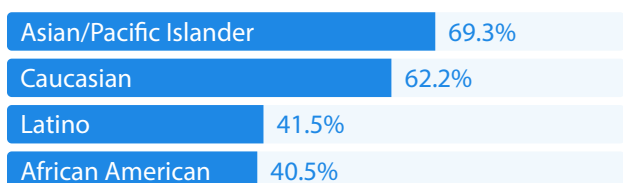
Source: [NSCRE: First-Year Persistence and Retention for Fall 2017 Cohort](#)



Completion:

Regardless of the type of institutions they started in, as of 2019, the percentage of students who completed a bachelor's program in five years was:

Source: [Educationdata.org: College Graduation Statistics](#)



With college graduates being more likely to be employed and earning a median salary that is [almost \\$25,000 higher](#) than those only holding a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree is still a very beneficial investment. But, it remains harder for some students to obtain than others.

As the data indicates, the equity gap in education, especially higher education, is well-documented. But what are some of the root causes of this equity gap? Examining one of the most notable bridges from high school to college, Advanced Placement, can help us better understand this disparity.

THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM: ADVANTAGES AND BENEFITS

By exposing high school students to the same level of rigor college students experience in their studies, AP courses give students a tremendous head start in postsecondary education by familiarizing them with the intensity of college-level coursework, setting them up for success in a university setting.



Compared to their non-AP classmates, AP students who achieve a 3 or better score on AP exams tend to:

- Graduate high school at a higher rate
- Take more credit hours per semester in college
- Graduate college within four to five years
- Graduate college with a higher Grade Point Average (GPA)
- Outperform non-AP students in the same course subjects once in college

Moreover, [studies have linked](#) AP access to success in college and AP participation to finishing college.

AP courses also offer a host of benefits to high school students aspiring to go on to college and pursue undergraduate degrees that will hopefully translate into rewarding careers. Among those benefits are:

- Help with admissions at competitive schools by showing success in rigorous coursework
- Developing advanced skills needed in college
- Graduate college within four to five years
- Potential to earn scholarships
- Earning credit for college courses and placement in college courses, thus reducing college costs and shortening the overall time spent in college

AP performance is also considered “a stronger indicator than socioeconomic status and GPA” for predicting academic success. Not to mention that college education in itself catapults students in life, exposing them to a better socioeconomic status, higher earnings, better job opportunities, and better access to housing, just to name a few benefits. However, the AP program is not without its fair share of challenges regarding equitable access.

THE AP EQUITY GAP

Notwithstanding its many advantages and benefits, access to the AP program remains a challenge for specific demographics of students. In its [10th Annual Report to the Nation](#), the College Board® acknowledged the equity gap in AP course access and exam participation for underserved students, stating, “Although more underserved minority and low-income students are taking AP courses, these students remain underrepresented in AP classrooms.”

Barriers to AP courses prevent underrepresented high school students from taking advantage of the above-mentioned AP and college education benefits. The result is inequities across socioeconomic and, unfortunately, racial and ethnic lines regarding access to the same advanced pathway to college their middle- and upper-income and white counterparts enjoy. Some of these barriers include:

Even though the College Board offers a \$33 fee reduction per AP Exam for eligible students, there are other costs to consider.

1 Access, Costs, and Enrollment Criteria

Students attending schools in underserved communities and districts might not have the option to take AP courses even if they wanted to because their school or district may not offer an advanced program. These schools may lack adequate resources and funding to sustain standard academic programs, let alone the AP program at their institutions.

Moreover, there are costs associated with the AP program and exams, which can be significant for students from lower-income families. Each AP Exam costs **\$95** on average, and over the years, federal and state funding for AP exams has declined considerably. Even though the College Board offers a \$33 fee reduction per AP Exam for eligible students (free or reduced lunch program participants), there are other costs to consider. These include study materials such as textbooks, notebooks, pens, papers, a calculator, and electronic devices, to name a few.

Another limitation in AP participation is how students are considered or vetted for the opportunity to enroll in the program. Every school differs in its AP participation criteria; some offer open enrollment where any student who has taken prerequisite classes can enroll, while others have additional requirements such as:

Teacher Referrals

Students may need to be recommended by a teacher to participate in an AP program. This recommendation can be beneficial because teachers are likely to know their students' strengths and weaknesses, making it appropriate for them to identify which students are best prepared for advanced placement or make good AP candidates.

Standardized Test Scores

Other metrics used to measure students' "AP Potential" or predict their performance in AP programs include standardized tests like the PSAT®, with the College Board [publishing score correlations between the PSAT and potential AP Exam success](#) for schools to use in vetting students.

While both referrals and using data points like test scores, previous coursework, or GPAs can help predict success in advanced coursework, if used in isolation, they can easily lead to overlooking students who may indeed be capable of success. For example, the referral selection process presents the potential for [implicit](#) and unconscious bias among even the most well-intended educators. Teachers might also be prone to making unconscious predictions about ethnic minority students based on their upbringing, lived experiences, or frame of reference.

2 Limiting Self-Belief

Unfortunately, even when the opportunity to participate in AP programs is available to all willing students, some may choose not to enroll because they lack confidence or doubt themselves. This self-doubt often results from the nature of feedback they have received throughout their K-12 academic experience.

If a student has often heard that they aren't "smart enough," "advanced," or "a good fit" for AP, it could result in a belief that they have a finite potential in what they can accomplish academically. This self-doubt will likely inhibit them from developing a growth mindset where they believe in their potential and are instead reluctant to take on the challenge of the AP program due to their fear of failure.



...teachers are likely to know their students' strengths and weaknesses, making it appropriate for them to identify which students are best prepared for advanced placement or make good AP candidates.

3 Internet and Device Access

Additionally, in the digital age, students need Internet access more than ever. AP courses are rigorous, and students often need to conduct a host of online activities, including online research, reading articles and e-books, reviewing prep materials, and taking practice tests. To do so, they require a stable Internet connection and electronic devices such as laptops and tablets.

Unfortunately, the disparities in consistent and reliable Internet and device access have created a “homework gap,” defined as “[school-age children lacking the connectivity they need to complete schoolwork at home](#).” Data from a 2015 Pew Research Center article, [The numbers behind the broadband ‘homework gap’](#), reveals the following disparities in high-speed Internet access across US households by race and socioeconomic status:



Some **5 million households** with school-age children do not have high-speed Internet service at home.



Low-income households, especially **Blacks and Hispanics**, **make up a disproportionate share** of the 5 million with no high-speed Internet service.



Students from lower-income families are **four times more likely to be without broadband** than their middle- or upper-income counterparts.

For some students, access to reliable high-speed Internet is only half the battle; some also lack access to a device at home, e.g., a laptop or desktop computer, or have to share a single device with other household members. This lack of, or limited access to, their own devices makes it difficult for students to study consistently or complete homework.

4 Lack of Support

[Research shows](#) that “when advanced opportunities are extended to students of color . . . these students thrive alongside their peers.” But access alone is not enough. By the time Black, Latinx, English language learners, and low-income students gain access to AP in high school, they are not starting on a level playing field. That’s why, beyond fair representation in AP, these students who have not historically been part of advanced courses need extra support and dedicated attention.

Because students enter their AP courses with varying skill levels, many may need additional help succeeding in their coursework. This not only includes the need for differentiated and individualized instruction in class. Many students seek out assistance from private tutors outside of class to help them improve their AP grades and scores. However, personal tutoring services can be expensive and out of reach for students from low-income families.

It is critical to close the gap by making AP accessible and equipping students with the tools they need to succeed once enrolled in advanced courses. The challenge is that most educators who genuinely want to eliminate this equity gap face limitations beyond their control, e.g., inequities in funding or teacher shortages that make it difficult for AP classes to be offered to all students who want to take them. In other cases, willing change agents are simply unsure how to go about closing the AP equity gap effectively.

BRIDGING THE AP EQUITY GAP

With these present problems that sustain the equity gap in AP education well-documented, there are several practical considerations toward bridging the gap that we can consider:

1 Extending AP Access to All

Making AP classes available to all willing and academically prepared students can prevent them from being overlooked for AP consideration. Adopting best practices in equity assignment, such as an Academic Acceleration policy, where districts and schools commit that their “accelerated classes look like their hallways” could make a tremendous difference.

By refusing to turn away willing participants in AP, educators make students feel included and give them a sense of belonging in the AP experience. To bridge the equity gap in education and AP is to admit that all students deserve access.

In an article for EdWeek, AP Teacher and 2016 Washington State Teacher of the Year and National Teacher of the Year Finalist Nate Bowling offers the following concrete steps to promote equity in AP:

- Increase the number of seats in advanced classes by converting general education classes to accelerated classes. More sections mean more access for students.
- Seek out ‘non-traditional AP students’ (male students-of-color, in particular) and push them to take more rigorous classes.
- Move from “opt-in” to “opt-out” AP enrollment. The more of a hassle you make getting out, the more likely students stay in the course.

Source: [When It Comes to Advanced Coursework, Equity Is Access](#)

2 Encourage a Growth Mindset

Like all human beings, students are creatures of habit, and often, success in life depends on one’s mindset. That’s why it’s fundamental that educators create an environment wherein students can develop a growth mindset — the belief that they are more than their natural talents. Students with a growth mindset believe that they can achieve more through productive effort, creative problem solving, good habits, and feedback from others than their latent intelligence. By assisting students in understanding that their hard work, willingness to seek help, and learning from their mistakes can propel them to the next level, educators can infuse much-needed confidence and resilience into students and encourage them to take AP courses.

Part of developing a growth mindset is reexamining the role of failure in education. Teachers who foster a growth mindset help students understand that failure is never final but a learning



opportunity, and they make a habit of praising the productive struggle instead of rewarding only the outcome, i.e., midterms, final exams, or AP scores. In other words, students who are willing to try should be allowed to do just that and encouraged to give it their best effort, seek help when they need it, and, most importantly, be given the learning tools they need to succeed.

If educators can shift the focus of the learning experience away from test scores to concept mastery, more students will feel more optimistic and confident about their learning abilities. That's why feedback plays a significant role in building a robust growth mindset. Students who receive timely and constructive feedback on their work will learn to recognize where they may have erred and can identify what they need to know to do better the next time. Whether they are advanced students taking rigorous AP classes or struggling students who are capable but lack the confidence to challenge themselves, a growth mindset can make all the difference.

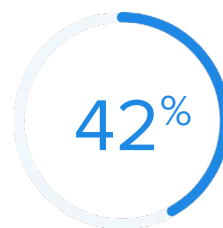
3 Partner With Equity-Driven Organizations

With numerous organizations dedicated to the fight for equity in education, some of the most attainable solutions for school districts can be found in the research and recommendations put forth by such organizations. Tapping into existing data on the equity gap, including root causes, policies that sustain the status quo, best practices, and proven solutions, is an excellent step that educators can take to drive change.

Nonprofit organizations such as [AVID](#) ([Advancement Via Individual Determination](#)) have made it their mission “to close the opportunity gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society.” Their activities are centered on changing lives by helping schools shift to a more equitable, student-centered approach.

Despite **75%** of AVID students being from a low socioeconomic status background and **80%** being underrepresented students, they manage to outperform their peers in crucial metrics nationwide.

The following statistics from AVID demonstrate their proven track record:



42% of first-generation, low-income AVID college students graduate with a four-year degree within six years

2 million

Impact more than
2 million students
annually

7,000

Serve more than **7,000**
schools across the US,
Canada, and Australia

85,000

Train **85,000** educators
annually

4x

AVID alumni who go
to college are **4x** more
likely to graduate than
their national peers

Source: [AVID Snapshot](#)

AVID is just one of several legitimate, education-centric institutions fighting the equity gap in education head-on. Other notable nonprofit organizations dedicated to building equity in college readiness exist, and partnering with them can benefit administrators in their quest to become change agents.



As more schools offer such Internet and device support to their students, it enables them to use advanced technology resources such as UWorld to supplement their instruction.

4 Leverage Education Technology To Support Instruction

While education technology can be a game-changer for students, we must prioritize solving the Internet access limitations lower-income students face. It is encouraging to see more and more school districts implementing proactive solutions to this issue. Some of these solutions include one-to-one computing that allows each enrolled student to use an electronic device to access the Internet, digital course materials, and electronic textbooks, and providing hotspots that students can use at home.

As more schools offer such Internet and device support to their students, it enables them to use advanced technology resources such as [UWorld](#) to supplement their instruction. At UWorld, we are confident that an effective way to bridge the equity gap is by leveraging the utility of technology in education, specifically, how learning tools can help support students while saving time and effort for teachers.

Supplemental online resources such as our [Learning Tools for AP® Courses](#) can provide increased learning opportunities for all students, including those who may need a little extra support or might be taking AP for the first time. By providing such a resource to their students, administrators can ensure that students from low-income families no longer lack the tools they need to succeed in AP programs because they can't afford to purchase them independently.

Plus, school districts that make AP resources available to students and teachers alike empower all parties by supporting in-class instruction. For example, the reporting functions our learning tools offer can help teachers find knowledge gaps to remediate early on and help administrators know which students, classes, and campuses are on track or need extra support. These insights ensure that students and teachers have what they need to succeed in AP throughout the school year.

...as students practice more and perform better each time, their confidence increases, and their attitudes shift in the direction of believing in their capabilities.

Designed to support students in their AP courses and prepare them for the AP exams, our online learning tools offer a user experience that encourages productive struggle to help master complex subjects. We analyze the logic students use to arrive at a solution and give them in-depth explanations of why that method was effective or if there was an alternative that would have led to a more successful outcome.

By providing students with hundreds of practice questions that emulate College Board-level content and in-depth answer explanations, our active-learning approach helps students build the stamina and perseverance to try, fail, learn from their mistakes, try again, and succeed. In our experience, as students practice more and perform better each time, their confidence increases, and their attitudes shift in the direction of believing in their capabilities.

CONCLUSION

We recognize that there's no one-size-fits-all solution to bridging the equity gap in education and AP. Nonetheless, if all of us who serve in education can work together to identify these gaps, we can begin to formulate practical and sustainable solutions. If we make it our collective mission to bridge the equity gap in education and AP, we will prioritize the needs of underserved and underrepresented students.





Empower Your Students for AP[®] Success with UWorld

Learn more about UWorld's Online Learning Tools for AP Courses.

collegereadiness.uworld.com

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