

Advanced Placement or Dual Credit: Which Course Should You Take?

Many gifted high school students looking for an academic challenge or hoping to jump start their college education enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses. Although both of these acceleration options allow students to work toward their high school graduation while also potentially earning credit toward a college degree, they are not identical opportunities. Students need to understand the benefits and limitations of these options in order to make the choice that is best for them.

The first step is knowing the basic differences between AP and dual credit courses. The chart below breaks down the key points.



The next step is considering what the students' goals are in taking a college-level course. For many students, the primary consideration is saving time and money on their college degree. In this scenario,

both AP and dual credit courses can help, but only if the student has a clear post-graduation plan. Whether or not students earn credit and what kind of credit is earned depends ultimately on where they go to college and their choice of major.

For dual credit, students who attend the college through which they take the course will keep their earned credits. However, credits earned through a public college will not necessarily be recognized at a private college or a public college in another state.

Moreover, there may be less expensive options to earning that same college credit. For example, Kentucky students might take as dual credit the WKU course Math

	ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES	DUAL CREDIT COURSES
Sponsoring Organization	College Board	Individual two- or four-year colleges and universities
Affiliation	No affiliation with a particular college or university; National acceptance of scores varies	Affiliated with a specific two- or four-year college or university; Credit may or may not transfer to other colleges and universities
Location	Taught at the student's high school or, if not offered at the school, then online through an approved provider	Taught at the student's high school, on a college campus, or online
Teachers	Specialized AP training is not required in all states but is encouraged and available	Approved by affiliated college; requirements vary (often 12 graduate hours in area of subject)
Course content	Expected to prepare students to take a national AP test	Expected to be the same as the college's course
Cost to students	No cost to take the course, but there is a test-taking fee that may be covered by the state	Students pay college tuition but usually at a highly discounted rate
Credits	Depending on the college where the student matriculates, a score of 3, 4, or 5 (scale is 1-5) on the AP test can translate into credit and/or the satisfying of a higher-level course prerequisite	If they pass the course, students earn credit at the affiliated college. If the student matriculates at a different college, the credit may or may not transfer
Effect of grade earned on academic standing in college	Does not affect the student's college GPA or academic standing	Grade is applied to the student's college GPA and will affect the student's academic status at that college



116: College Algebra in order to fulfill the university's quantitative reasoning general education requirement. However, Bruce Kessler, head of the Math Department at WKU, points out a math ACT score of 26 or higher gives the student that same credit, without additional cost: "If you end up taking a course you didn't need, then it really hasn't saved you anything."

Cost-effectiveness also depends on the student's major. Bruce notes that if students take AP Calculus AB, WKU "will either give Calculus I credit or, for a high end score, Calculus I and Calculus II credit, so if students are moving toward a major that requires calculus, then AP is some of the cheapest credit that they'll earn."

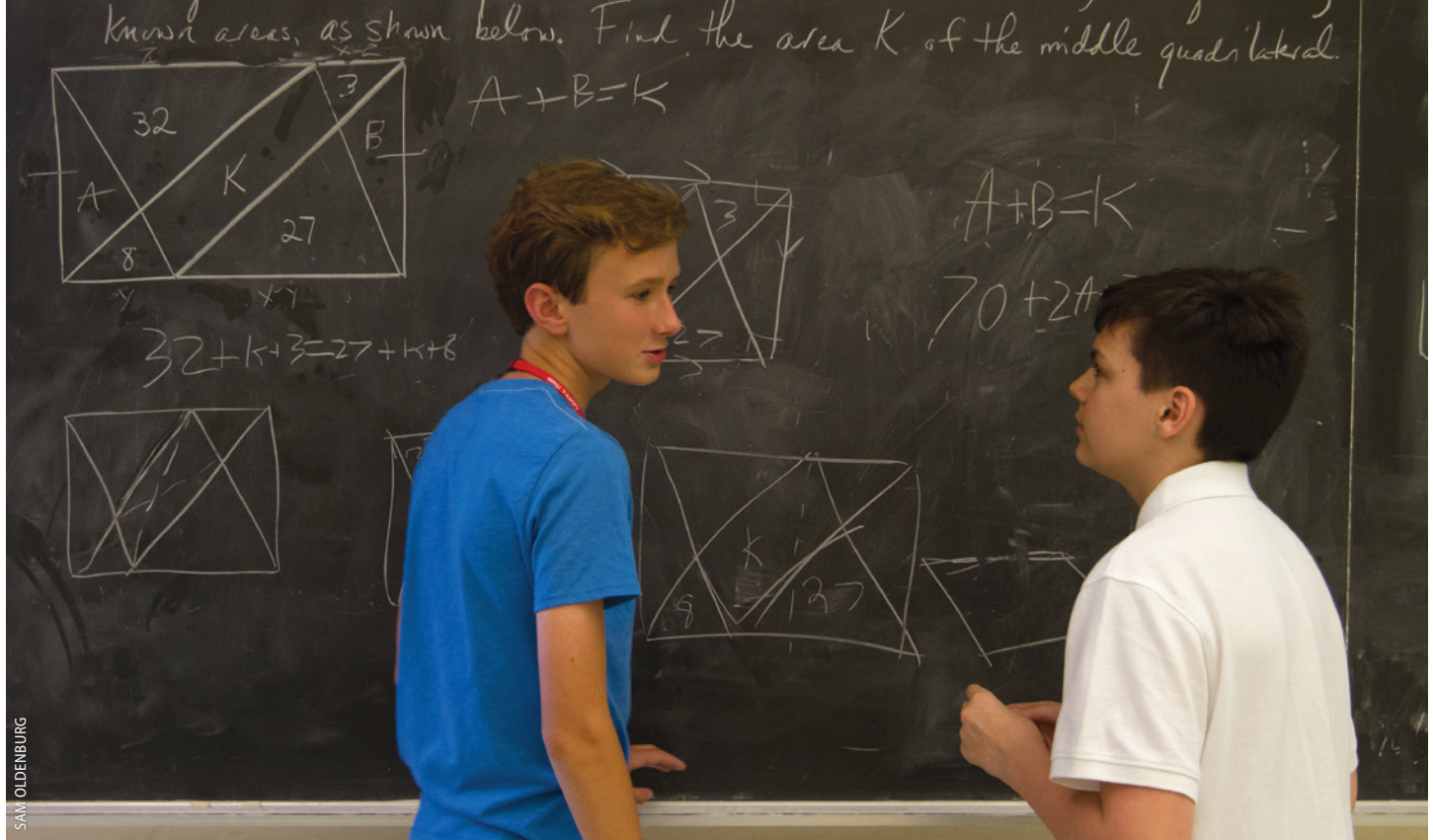
Koji Barnaby (FSS 2005, '10; WSS 2010, '13), a 2017 graduate of Bowling Green High School and now a first-year student at WKU, took seven AP classes and three dual credit courses while in high school. Some of those courses, like dual credit Spanish and AP Biology, Chemistry, and Calculus BC, will help him with his double major in biochemistry and Spanish. The dual credit chemistry class he took in ninth grade, however, will not help because it is designed for non-chemistry majors.

Leah Krisher, a guidance counselor at Warren East High School with eighteen years of experience, advises, "The more competitive the college, the less likely dual credit courses will transfer and the higher a score is needed on the AP test, so students have to do their research on the colleges they're interested in. If they're looking at a more competitive school, then AP is the route" because it is more widely accepted as credit.

However, AP students need to keep in mind that they will need to earn a certain score on the test in order to earn that credit. At most colleges, a score of 3 will be enough to earn credit in a general education course and possibly a class that will help them advance in their major. On the other hand, some of the most competitive colleges in the country may require a 5 for the students to receive credit, and that credit may be worth less than a full college course.

Gifted students hopefully approach education as a chance to challenge themselves and gain the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed wherever they go to college, so, beyond questions of economy and efficiency, another priority to consider when selecting AP or dual credit courses is the quality of the educational experience.

Leah says, "Both AP courses and dual credit courses, if done as prescribed, are extremely beneficial: students are exposed to more rigor, a faster pace, more depth, college content, and a different way to study." She adds that "dual credit is an incredible opportunity for any student meeting college benchmarks," but "AP courses better serve the needs of high-end, very gifted students." Please note that The College Board, which administers the AP program, argues that AP is not designed for gifted students; rather, the tests are designed for any college-bound student.



Professors also see a difference between AP and dual credit courses in what students learn. Rob Hale, head of the English Department at WKU, notes, “When I’ve had students in a class like English 200 [Introduction to Literature], the students who had taken dual credit didn’t seem as prepared. In an AP English class there’s usually going to be more talented writers who are going to be challenged to be successful. If it’s a choice between dual credit and AP, I’d pick AP every time.”

In his experience, Koji found the students in his AP classes tended to be more motivated than those in the dual credit courses because they knew that had to do well on the test at the end rather than simply passing the course in order to earn college credit.

The College Board did a study of high school students who graduated in 2006, comparing those at four-year colleges who took AP with those who took dual credit (it did not look at students who took both). They divided those groups into students who earned a 3 or better on their AP exam, students who earned less than a 3, students who took dual credit from a

four-year college, and students who took dual credit from a two-year college.

Overall, the research showed stronger performances in higher education by students who took AP rather than dual credit. AP students who scored a 3 or higher were significantly stronger on several key markers than students who took dual credit courses at two- or four-year colleges. These markers included staying in college for four years, first-year GPA, and both four-year and six-year graduation rates. Additionally, AP students who earned less than a 3 were still more likely to persist in college for four years and to graduate in six years than were students who took dual credit. The weakest performing group in all categories were those who took dual credit through two-year colleges. (Wyatt, Patterson, & Di Giacomo, 2014).

Rob, whose department does not offer dual credit courses except for two taught on WKU’s campus in Glasgow, sees the oversight of the courses as crucial: “AP English courses are tried and true: even if the instruction were to be less than wonderful, there’s a failsafe because students have to pass this nationally vetted

test in order to get credit for the course. And in my experience, the oversight isn’t as consistent in dual credit English courses as it is for AP classes.” Bruce, on the other hand, is satisfied with the quality of the dual credit classes offered through his department, which has a designated faculty member to oversee the content and quality of the courses.

Ultimately, the quality of the class depends on the quality of the curriculum and the quality of the teacher. As Leah says, “You need a teacher who’s trained and can teach at different levels.” To decide which course is right, students need to get as much information as possible and to consult with those who understand their priorities and plans. Whatever they decide, dual credit and AP courses both can extend the possibilities for gifted students to learn, explore, and achieve.

SOURCES

Wyatt, J., Patterson, B., & Di Giacomo, F. T. (2014). *A comparison of the college outcomes of AP and dual enrollment students*. Retrieved from research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2014/7/comparison-college-outcomes-ap-and-dual-enrollment-students-progress.pdf