Changing courses for the better

WHEN FIELDSTON FINALLY DECIDED TO DROP ITS AP PROGRAM, IT FOUND LITTLE TO SACRIFICE AND MUCH TO GAIN.

By Rachel Friis Stettler and Joseph Algrant

TOWARD THE END OF THE FOUR-YEAR PROCESS that culminated in Fieldston School's decision to drop Advanced Placement courses, a Fieldston parent wrote us a note of encouragement and support: "I think, in fact, it would be a profound advantage for a high school to have the confidence about the strength and uniqueness of its teaching so that it did not fear comparison with any traditional ritual, especially a tradition that is being examined for encouraging anything but the right stuff."

Last year was the first year that Fieldston (New York) did not offer any Advanced Placement courses. Students who might have taken AP History took "Law and Society" or "The Third World and the Cold War," two options in a broad elective program. Students who might have signed up for AP Spanish took "Contemporary Spain" or "Advanced Literary Themes." Although we did administer the AP exams on site, the numbers of students who signed up for the exams dropped from 150 the previous year to 75, and on the day of the tests only 40 students showed up.

ILLUSTRATION BY WHITNEY SHERMAN

Any lingering doubts as to the impact of this decision outside the school were dispelled when the early-decision acceptances came in for the class of 2002. We saw the most successful college acceptance record in years, with 110 out of 127 students admitted to their first- or second-choice schools, and 92 accepted to schools considered among the most selective in the nation. We had predicted these outcomes, considering the academic strength of this class; still, it was nice to get this confirmation, and to know that the AP decision did not negatively affect us.

Why did we drop AP courses? And, as many colleagues at other schools have asked even more pointedly, *how* did we do it?

A little philosophy, first. Independent schools are privileged. We do not have to respond to the whims of the state, nor to every or any educational trend. We can maximize our time attuned to students and how they learn, and to the development of curriculum that enriches them and encourages the skills and attitudes of independent thinkers. Our founding charters and missions established independence for a range of reasons, but they now give all of us relative curricular autonomy, the ability to bring together a faculty of scholars and thinkers who are equipped to develop rich, developmentally sound programs of study. As Fred Calder, the executive director of New York State Association of Independent Schools, wrote in a letter to member schools a few years ago: "If we cannot design our programs according to our best lights and the needs of our communities, then let the monolith prevail and give up the enterprise. Standardized testing in subject areas essentially smothers original thought, more fatally, because of the irresistible pressure on teachers to teach to the tests."

Fieldston's ongoing mission is to provide a humanistic, ethical, and progressive education. The decision to eliminate the AP program grew out of that mission. Over time, we came to the conclusion that the AP program at Fieldston was not only at odds with our educational and social purpose, but it lacked courses with multicultural content; in some disciplines, most notably history and science, it left little room for divergence. The AP courses encouraged teachers to cover a great breadth of material superficially, leaving little time for in-depth analysis, emphasizing speed of assimilation and memorization of information rather than a deep understanding of ideas and themes. Time for grappling with ideas and synthesizing knowledge, the stuff of higher-order thinking, was curtailed, even though students complained. Lecture became the pedagogical tool best suit-

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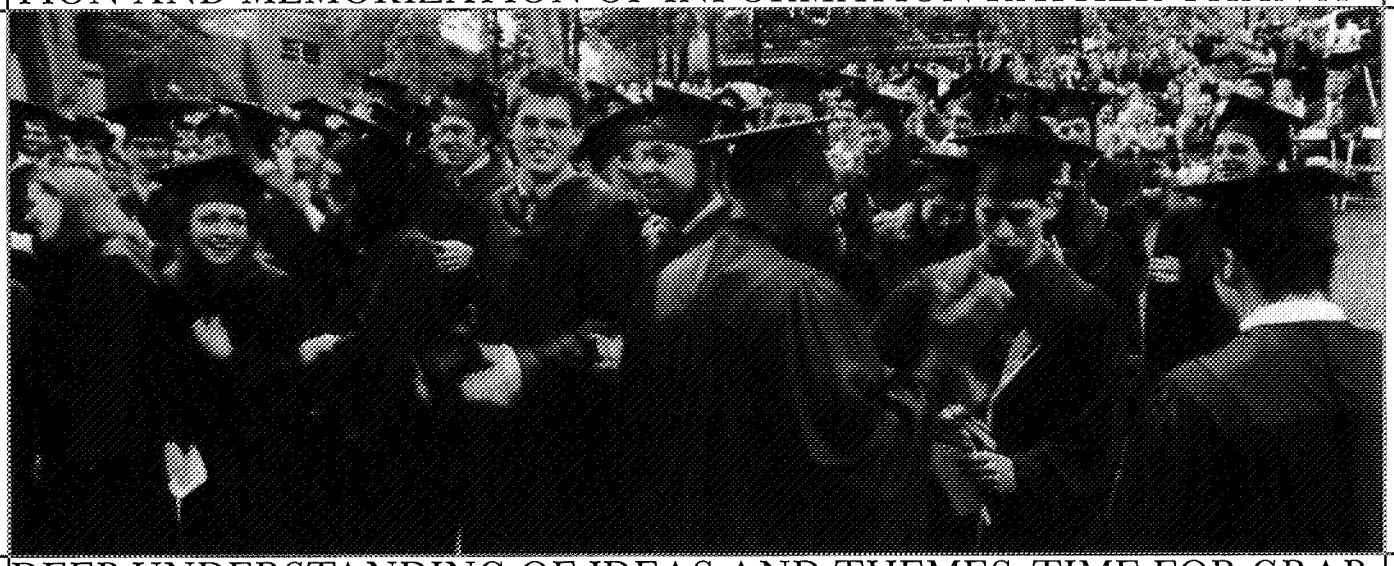
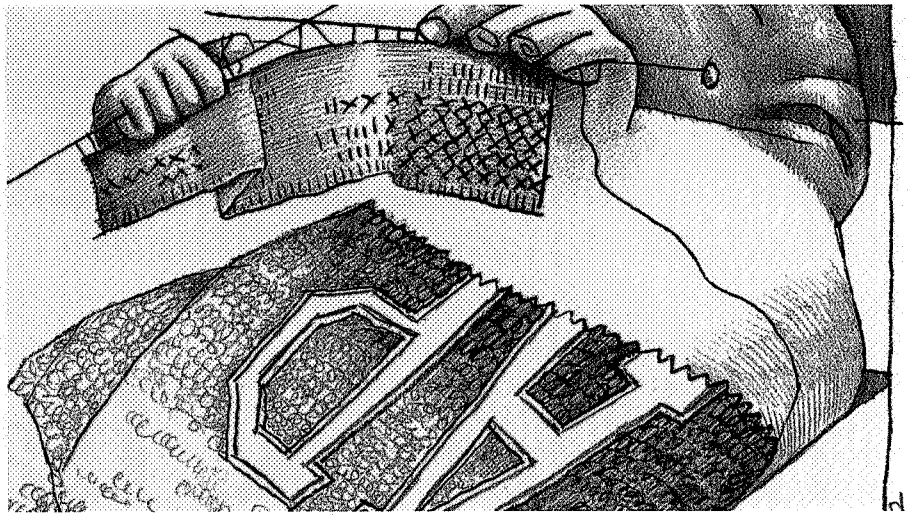


ed to the pace needed to complete the course. In short, the AP program never satisfactorily accommodated our students' needs for advanced work that stimulated them. We risked offering an 11th- and 12th-grade experience that was an unrelenting and unsatisfying grind.

Our decision to drop AP courses came in the early swell of nationwide skepticism about the trend towards standardized curriculum. Later, last year, the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education issued reports criticizing AP math and science for covering too much material, and AP chemistry and biology in particular for failing to keep pace with new developments. Harvard University announced its decision to require a score of five on an AP test in order to earn any credit or advanced placement, while the science department at M.I.T. reported its decision not to give AP credit in chemistry at all, since freshmen placing out were ill-prepared for upper-level courses. Yale, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford have all reported they, too, are reassessing their policies on AP credit.

Our discussion about the AP courses began four years ago with complaints about the AP program arising almost simultaneously from several constituencies. Teachers of these courses were unhappy with the rigidity of the curriculum. In feeling bound to enable students to do well on the exam, they were frustrated by the pedagogical shift required. Covering more material at less depth meant leaving too many great class discussions unfinished. The frustration became as exhausting as the pace.

At the same time, students found themselves frustrated, too. Students in AP courses had risen through the curriculum in honors courses that stressed in-depth exploration and analysis. They flourished on serious debate and divergent opinions. Upon reaching the supposedly higher level of many AP courses, the students found a different and, in their opinion, unacceptable intellectual atmosphere and wound up complaining to their teachers, department chairs, and administrators about the lack of creativity and spark in these classes.



And yet, students and their families felt compelled to continue to enroll in AP courses because they understood colleges used AP courses as their way to assess that students were in the most rigorous program the school offered. This pressure often resulted, for our students, in pedagogically unsound decisions about junior and senior courses. From the administrative standpoint, we felt in a bind about how to best advise families.

The dilemma was pointed out with great eloquence by one of our students, Matt Spigelman, class of '98, who wrote a compelling essay about the Fieldston curriculum. He focused on the dilemma of juniors and seniors, forced to choose between AP History or English (good for the college résumé) and such homegrown advanced electives as "The Physics of Sound" or "The Literature of New York City" (more intellectually rewarding). "It is ironic," he wrote, "that the top students, who will be trying to take the most specialized courses available in college, are taking the most general courses available in high school, largely because the course titles are preceded by the letters 'AP.'" If Fieldston's goal was learning for learning's sake, he argued, the school should end this artificial hierarchy between the two sets of electives, abolish the AP program, and proclaim confidence in its own advanced courses. Matt's essay was widely circulated.

With the growing sense that the AP program was really not appropriate for us, we sent the discussion to the curriculum committee, which analyzed and studied the issue from all angles. In smaller groups, it conducted research into what other schools were doing, how our own community might respond, how it might impact future admissions, and what we would offer our juniors and seniors in lieu of AP courses.

Our research also included several conversations with the entire faculty, both to gain feedback and to keep the process honest and transparent. A number of teachers were opposed at the start. Some were quite involved with the courses and the programs; others had written textbooks to prepare for the exam. Their input ensured that we faced the tough questions.

The information, as we gathered and sorted it, suggested that we could, in fact, move away from offering AP courses with little to sacrifice or fear, and much to

gain. We decided that to selectively eliminate the AP designation by department would continue to perpetuate the false hierarchy across the curriculum. Even the few departments that were relatively content with the AP courses realized the importance of a common approach. The momentum we gained from this work allowed us to take the next step of involving parents in the discussion. David Shapiro, the school's principal at the time, wrote to the parent body, explaining the discussion and giving them the opportunity to respond in kind. He received over 150 responses to the letter, the majority of which were supportive, and many others who were willing to hear us out and reserve judgment. Besides the vocal families who supported the idea from the start, we also benefited here from the trust that exists between the school and its families. There is a strong belief within the community that the school has always acted in the best interests of the students.

We knew that parents understandably would want reassurance that their children would not be at a disadvantage in the college process. Accordingly, our college office spent considerable time contacting 40 colleges and universities — the majority of schools our graduates attend. All knew the school and its curriculum; all were supportive. They agreed to treat an advanced or honors course as an AP equivalent if they had a policy of granting advanced standing or placement. The most difficult conversations were with state universities, yet they expressed their willingness to work with us when looking at transcripts and assigning weight to courses for GPAs. (This is a continuing issue with state universities, since we, like many private schools, do not rank our senior class, weight courses in a GPA, or inflate grades dramatically.)

The curriculum committee felt strengthened by the responses from families and colleges, and its work culminated in a proposal to the department chairs and the principal, who brought the matter to the full faculty for one last discussion and a vote, which was strongly in favor of phasing out the program over two years. Present juniors would have AP courses the following year but present sophomores would not. This phase-out allowed us to sustain the program for those students who began it, and it provided time for the faulty to begin to restructure its curricula. That vote was followed by the approval of the board of trustees.

When the following statement arrived from Stanford University in the fall of 1999, we knew that the die had been cast. "I applaud Fieldston's proposed decision to drop the AP curriculum," wrote Robert Kinally, then the university's dean of admissions. "Your decision reflects the courage of your convictions about teaching and

learning. I hope it encourages other schools to follow Fieldston's lead." He encouraged our college office to share that statement with parents, which we did at a forum to further explain the decision and answer any remaining questions. It was also reassuring to other parents to learn about other independent schools that do not offer APs in most or all subjects, like Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire) and The Brearley School (New York).

New Jersey, and the Sacramento County Schools in California covered the issue and our decision. We declined many inquiries, especially those from local television news programs, as least likely to have the time to consider the story in any complexity.

Now, another school year is underway, and the memory of the AP program dims with every month. Internally, it is not an issue; people neither talk about nor refer to it much. Neither the parent community nor the colleges have any questions. The end of the academic year is no longer dictated by the mid-May testing calendar, and May remains intact. (Ironically, this creates room for additional content in classes that were *de facto* ended with the AP exam.)

Spanish has become an elective program. We have instituted a senior project option that 50 percent of the senior class participated in last year. It enables them to design a project with a faculty member that takes the place of one or two of their second-semester courses. The projects have ranged from directing plays with students and faculty to creative writing projects, teaching assistantships in our own classrooms and our elementary-school classrooms, the design and building of Harkness (seminar) tables for our classrooms, documentary and film productions, and many significant community-service projects. We are open to possibility and excited at the prospects of developing our curriculum further.

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COURAGE OF YOUR CONVICTIONS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING. I HOPE IT ENCOURAGES OTHER SCHOOLS TO FOLLOW FIELDSTON'S LEAD."

Media interest in our decision, following the national reports critical of AP, was heavy. There were articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Village Voice*, *Education Week*, and an interview on National Public Radio with principal Rachel Stettler and Lee Jones from the College Board. College papers from Northwestern University and Dartmouth College and local high-school papers from schools such as Horace Mann in New York City, Montclair Kimberley Academy in

The students continue to be focused on the challenge and intellectual vibrancy of classes and programs. Freed of the weight of the AP program, a vast elective program in English and History has been broadened and strengthened. Upper-level

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