

CREDIT-BY-EXAMINATION AS SEEN BY SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND COORDINATORS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN FLORIDA

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A sample of secondary school teachers, and most of the district coordinators for testing and evaluation in Florida, responded to a series of questionnaires designed to obtain their views concerning the awarding of college level course credit as the result of achieving a designated cutoff score on an examination. Descriptive brochures for the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and the Advanced Placement Program (APP) were included with the questionnaires for review by the survey participants. Questionnaire analyses revealed that there is considerable support for the concept of credit-by-examination programs for high school students, that the CLEP and the APP materials are of very high quality but are inadequate as study aids, that credit-by-examination is a positive motivating force for high school students, and that greater emphasis should be given the availability of credit-by-examination. Furthermore, concern was expressed over the divergent approaches to credit-by-examination used by the CLEP and the APP as evidenced by the feeling that the CLEP may be inferior to the APP because CLEP examinations appear to be less difficult.

Introduction

Credit-by-examination is a relatively old educational innovation which has only recently become a nationally accepted method for awarding college level credit. The Advanced Placement Program, which enables students to earn college credit while studying in high school, has been available since the mid-fifties. The more recent and far more popular College Level Examination Program has become its chief rival. This paper reports the results of a survey designed to obtain the views of secondary school teachers and coordinators of accountability in Florida toward these two programs and, more generally, toward the concept of awarding college level credit to students still enrolled in high school.

Florida colleges and universities award up to 45 quarter hours of credit to students who attain a prescribed cutoff score on the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) General Examinations. Although credit is also given on the basis of performance on the CLEP Subject Examinations, students favor the CLEP General Examinations over both the CLEP Subject Examinations and the Advanced Placement Program (APP) tests. During the year September 1, 1974 through August 31, 1975 more than 7,500 students presented CLEP scores (most of which were from the General Examinations) to the nine public universities in Florida, and were awarded a total of 125,007 quarter hours of credit. In the same year, 534 students sent APP scores to the same nine universities resulting in the awarding of 2,450 hours of credit. This imbalance between the CLEP and the APP testing programs has become a matter of concern to high school teachers and college faculty members alike.

Considerable research effort is being focused on credit-by-examination in Florida, but these studies deal mainly with the CLEP. Currently, a five-year study is being conducted by a task force composed of researchers from community colleges and public universities in Florida to examine the relationship between successful performance on the CLEP and student classroom achievement. In an earlier study, Losak and Lin (1973) reported that students who earned CLEP credit made faster progress in college than students of similar academic potential who did not earn CLEP credit, and did so without showing any drop in academic achievement. Tully (1974) associated CLEP General Examination scores earned by midyear college freshmen with their grades in introductory college courses. His results generally supported the present cutoff (50th percentile, college sophomore norms) used to award college credit. Caldwell (1976) looked at the sophomore-level courses of students who had earned 30 or more quarter hours of credit. He found that successful performance on the CLEP General Examinations did not deter students from registering for sophomore courses in General Education, and that the overall grade point average (GPA) of the "credit-earned" group was higher than the GPA of a control group. The collective results of the above studies contribute a measure of support to credit-by-examination policies followed by colleges and universities.

The Survey Project

Several sets of materials, each of which included four questionnaires, a CLEP descriptive brochure, and a set of APP course descriptions were sent to each county coordinator of accountability in Florida.¹ Questionnaire I contained items relating to the quality and appropriateness of the descriptive brochure for the CLEP General Examinations; Questionnaire II consisted of similar items relating to the CLEP Subject Examinations; and Questionnaire III was made up of items dealing with the Advanced Placement Program. Questionnaire IV had items designed to elicit agreement or disagreement with the concept of credit-by-examination, the cutoff score used to award credit, the role of the teacher in advising students to prepare to take tests leading to college credit, and student choice of one testing program over the other. This sequence was designed to insure that all participants who systematically reviewed the CLEP descriptive brochures, the APP course descriptions, and Questionnaires I,

¹The College Entrance Examination Board supported this study by making available, without cost, approximately 400 CLEP brochures and a similar number of sets of APP course descriptions which were sent to the teachers and coordinators participating in this study.

II, and III would be thoroughly familiar with the CLEP and the APP before responding to Questionnaire IV.

Counties with at least three percent of the total number of secondary school teachers in Florida, of which there are ten, were designated as "large" counties. The remaining 57 counties were designated "small" counties. Coordinators in the large counties were given the option of establishing either one or two five-teacher review committees. Coordinators in the small counties were asked to appoint only one review committee. A review committee consisted of an English teacher, a mathematics teacher, a social studies or history teacher, a physical science teacher, and a teacher of art, art history, or any other subject areas in the humanities.

The coordinators were asked to distribute a set of survey materials to each of the review committee members. Four weeks later the coordinators collected the completed questionnaires and returned them to the project director. The coordinators were also invited, but not required, to complete a set of questionnaires themselves.

Data Analysis

Fifty-five of Florida's 67 counties were represented in this study. Six of the large counties appointed two review committees and the remaining four appointed one review committee. Forty-five of the fifty-seven small counties chose to participate in the study. Of 365 sets of survey questionnaires distributed to the secondary school teachers, 86 sets were returned from the large counties and 246 sets were returned from the small counties for a total of 309, or 85 percent of the sets distributed. An additional 23 sets of questionnaires were returned by the coordinators.

Teachers and coordinators who attended the seminars conducted by the College Entrance Examination Board in Florida during the fall of 1975 were asked to indicate this attendance on Questionnaire IV. Fourteen of the 332 participants in the study reported they had attended the CEEB seminars.

Frequencies and percentages of alternative responses for each questionnaire item were computed. The data were coded in a manner to make possible a comparative analysis of the frequencies with which various subgroups of participants responded to the items. Among these comparative analyses were: coordinators vs. teachers, seminar participants vs. non-participants, and teachers from "small" counties vs. teachers from "large" counties.

The response patterns of the several subgroups were strikingly similar, and to present the details of these subgroup comparisons would serve no useful purpose. Instead, the results set forth will be confined to an analysis of the responses of the total group of participants (n=332) to the items of the four survey questionnaires.

Results

More than 80 percent of the respondents expressed agreement that the College Board's descriptive brochures for the CLEP and the APP (a) adequately define the areas covered by the tests, (b) provide sample questions that give a good indication of the general nature of the tests and indicate the level of the subject material, (c) identify the cognitive skills required to take the tests, and (d) contain test directions that are concise, explicit, and easily understood. The percentages of respondents agreeing that the content of the five tests

making up the General Examinations was appropriate to measure knowledge of introductory courses in college were of a lesser magnitude than the percentages expressing agreement concerning sample directions and test directions (see Table 1). While there was relatively little disagreement on the issue of coverage of course content in the tests, there were substantial percentages of respondents who had "no opinion" on the matter.

Table 1

Responses of Teachers and Coordinators Toward the Congruence Between Content of Tests and Content of Introductory College Courses			
Statement	Agree %	No Opinion %	Disagree %
The content of the Test appears to be appropriate for an introductory college course in			
<i>General Examinations</i>			
English Composition	63	29	8
Humanities	61	32	7
Mathematics	56	37	6
Natural Sciences	55	41	4
Social Sciences/History	61	35	4
<i>Subject Examinations</i>			
English Composition	54	37	9
Literature	47	45	8
College Algebra/Trigonometry	53	43	5
Biology/General Chemistry	46	49	5
American Government/ American History/Sociology/ Western Civilization	52	44	4

The percentages of respondents having "no opinion" on how well the content of the General Examinations related to the content of introductory college courses range from 29 percent to 41 percent; "no opinion" percentages for the Subject Examinations range from 37 percent to 49 percent. In contrast, respondents had far less difficulty in equating the content of the APP tests with college courses. When asked if the content of the APP tests as set forth in the course descriptions was appropriate for college level courses, 93 percent of the respondents expressed agreement, four percent indicated disagreement, and only three percent marked "no opinion."

Overall, 91 percent of the respondents felt that the CLEP descriptive booklets would assist the student in deciding whether to register for General Examinations. The percentage of agreement with respect to a student's use of the CLEP Subject Examination's descriptive material to guide him in selecting a test program was 88 percent, and for the APP was 90 percent.

In the view of the many respondents, the descriptive brochures that are useful in guiding the student toward a testing program will not serve the purpose of preparing the student to take the tests. When asked if the CLEP brochures and the APP study outlines were sufficient to help the student prepare for the tests, the "disagree" responses were substantial: 50 percent for the CLEP General Examinations, 46 percent for CLEP Subject Examinations, and 46 percent for the APP.

Eighty percent of the respondents expressed agreement with the statement that "credit-by-examination implemented an educationally sound concept." An equally high percentage of the respondents said that teachers should encourage students to prepare for credit-by-examination. In the opinion of 42 percent of the respondents, this encouragement should be given at grades 10-12; 27 percent believed that only juniors and seniors should be encouraged and another 18 percent would limit the encouragement to seniors. Thirteen percent of the respondents had no opinion or did not respond to this item.

As the credit-by-examination movement has gained momentum, some teachers and counselors have expressed the opinion that a high school student can have the best of two worlds by using the APP study outlines to prepare for being tested but by registering for the CLEP General Examinations instead of the APP tests. A study could thereby pay less money in test fees, spend less time in being tested, and yet stand a chance of earning more credit. Teachers who participated in this survey, however, voiced no clear-cut consensus on the issue. When asked if APP study guides should be used to prepare for the CLEP, only seven percent favored such a strategy, 38 percent were opposed, and 55 percent marked "no opinion."

Only one respondent in five thought that a student earning credit-by-examination should skip his senior year to enter college. A much larger percentage of respondents, one out of every two, would permit the high school student who earned college credit to take courses on a nearby college campus but would expect such a student to complete high school.

Fifty-five percent of the respondents reported that the cutoff for college credit in Florida's public universities (50th percentile, college sophomore norms) was about right, 34 percent believed that the cutoff was too low, two percent felt that it was too high, and 9 percent had no opinion or made no response. With respect to the amount of credit earned by the CLEP General Examinations (up to nine quarter hours per examination), 57 percent said the amount was about right, one percent said that not enough credit was earned and 27 percent thought that too much was earned. The remaining 15 percent had no opinion or made no response.

The respondents did not approve of the prevailing set of circumstances in many schools that places the responsibility for obtaining study materials for the CLEP on the students. Thirty-five percent of the respondents felt that the College

Board should provide study materials which could be purchased by interested students; 42 percent felt that the teachers should be provided with CLEP study materials at no cost; 14 percent felt that the students should be expected to identify and obtain their own study materials; and 9 percent had no opinion or did not respond.

Forty-seven percent of the respondents stated that the APP, which is linked to a preparatory program of study, had more of an appeal than a testing program (such as the CLEP) that is not tied to a preparatory study program. Twenty-one percent said that a study program did not add to the appeal of a testing program, and 32 percent expressed uncertainty or made no response.

Despite the preference of nearly 50 percent of the teachers for the APP, 61 percent of the survey participants said "no" when asked if teachers should steer students from one program to another. Twelve percent said "yes" to this question and 27 percent had no opinion on the issue or made no response.

The greater frequency with which the CLEP is administered (once a month) is, in the opinion of the respondents, a significant factor in explaining why many students choose the CLEP over the APP. One out of every two respondents said "yes" to this question, as compared to one out of every four respondents who said "no." Although the respondents expressed the opinion that the frequency with which the CLEP is given during the year drew students away from the APP, the availability of the CLEP is not the main reason cited for its popularity over the APP. The reason cited most frequently for student preference of the CLEP was that the CLEP tests are easier than the APP tests.

Discussion

There were many significant areas of consensus among secondary school teachers and coordinators of accountability. First, there was strong endorsement of the concept of credit-by-examination. Only one out of every two persons surveyed, however, expressed satisfaction with the way opportunities are now being offered to high school students to earn credit-by-examination. Second, CLEP brochures and APP course outlines are regarded as publications of high quality and of use to students in deciding whether to seek college credit via the CLEP or the APP. These publications alone, however, do not constitute sufficient study material to aid the student in preparing for the examinations. Third, credit-by-examination is a strong motivating force for students to do well in their high school classroom studies. While teachers believe they should encourage students to prepare for these examinations, they see no signs of students placing overemphasis on passing tests. Fourth, high school students, beginning in the tenth grade, should be informed of credit-by-examination opportunities. There was no significant support, however, for students earning credit-by-examination to leave high school before graduation except perhaps to enroll in classes on a nearby college campus while completing high school. Fifth, the publishers of CLEP should do more than they are doing to provide CLEP study materials to high school students planning to take the examinations. The publishers should either offer study materials to students for purchase by the students or provide teachers with guidelines, at no cost, for use in helping students assemble study materials. Sixth, there should be no relation between classroom

instruction and student preparation for credit-by-examination except for the teacher to cite periodically the opportunities for earning college-level credit. Last, teachers like the APP because it offers a preparatory program for the examinations. Teachers, however, do not see themselves as having the role of steering students toward the APP and away from the CLEP.

As one reviews these areas of consensus, the impression is that the full potential of credit-by-examination is not being realized despite the popularity of the CLEP General Examinations. The CLEP and the APP are, in a sense, vying for students. With teacher guidance in the choice of a testing program being withheld, students, for practical reasons, are choosing the CLEP. This may be a wrong choice for the student fortunate enough to have the academic potential to be challenged by college-level study while still in high school.

As reported above, teachers and coordinators had difficulty in equating the content of the CLEP tests, as described in the brochure, with the content of college-level courses. This finding, as it relates to the CLEP General Examinations, is not surprising in that the General Examinations were designed to be broad measures of general education.

The lack of consensus among the respondents concerning the content of the Subject Examinations as described in the CLEP brochure, and college-level courses, needs further study. Possibly, the relatively greater detail set forth in the APP course descriptions concerning course content, as compared to the brief statements in the CLEP brochure, may have led to an inconclusive reaction on the part of the respondents to the CLEP Subject Examinations and a favorable reaction to the APP materials.

The preference of the respondents for the APP, because of its supporting program of study and preparation, and the ability of the respondents to equate the content of the APP tests with the content of college-level courses have not had any pronounced impact on bringing about an expansion of the APP program. If large numbers of teachers are reluctant to recommend the APP over the CLEP, quite understandably,

students have no way of knowing that their teachers generally prefer one testing program over the other and why their teachers have developed that preference.

Teacher neutrality on political and religious issues may well be defended. Neutrality on the matter of recommending one testing program over another, especially when one testing program may be better suited to an academically talented student in need of a course of study commensurate to his abilities, is misplaced objectivity and cannot be defended.

Neither teachers nor students, according to the respondents, are aware of the flexibility that can be exercised in arranging for APP instruction for students in grades 11 and 12. Also, teachers and students are not generally aware that student success on three or more APP tests can result in the student's being placed in the sophomore year in college. Lack of knowledge on the part of teachers and students about these two meritorious features of the APP undoubtedly curtails student choice of the APP as a means for earning college-level credit.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The imbalance between the CLEP and APP programs of credit-by-examination should not continue. The APP, designed to prepare high school students to attain competency in college-level subjects, is often bypassed by students in favor of the CLEP, which offers no program of study and preparation. Secondary school students of high academic potential who participate in the APP can begin college-level study while still in high school.

Corrective action lies in the hands of the College Entrance Examination Board as well as in the hands of secondary school teachers. The College Board should carry through its declared intention to align the two testing programs. Pending this development, high school teachers should abandon their stance of neutrality and, without hesitation, urge the talented student to accept the challenge offered by the APP to step up his intellectual development over and beyond the pace generally established for high school students.

References

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