1990

The Required Course and the Advanced Student: A Placement Perspective

Michael R. Schliessmann
South Dakota State University

Laurie B. Haleta
South Dakota State University

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol2/iss1/9

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To many deans, department head, advisors and employers, the basic speech course is a must. The course, whatever its focus, provides students with a well-rounded repertoire of skills needed to succeed in other academic endeavors and to succeed in the ever expanding world of employment. To the student, however, the basic course may be required and therefore often viewed as a burden. Often this view is tempered by terms' end, when the student can more fully understand the nature of the course and its relevance to the “real world.” For some students, the basic course may be a real burden and may lack relevance. This group of students, normally small in quantity, is the group which has, through high school classroom experience or through participation in speech activities, already had speech training which probably exceeds the parameters of the basic course. In this paper, we would like to propose a rationale for placing these students in a different class. This will be done primarily by using an advanced placement system. We would also like to discuss some advantages and disadvantages of the program.

RATIONALE FOR ADVANCED PLACEMENT

One rationale for placing the student in a course beyond the basic course can be seen in his or her academic record.
Without opening a can of worms about predictive abilities, we may assume that some students are capable of doing advanced work based on their college entrance exam scores – the SAT or ACT. Another indication for placing the student in a higher level class may be the standing of the student in a high school graduating class. Such measures can be somewhat objective, but do not provide adequate basis for advanced placement.

Prior experience also may provide a basis for advanced placement. This experience typically falls into two general categories – classroom experience and experience in speech activities. An average high school student might have a one-half a semester in classroom speech training. In addition to being somewhat short, the subject matter and assignments may vary widely due to the training of the high school teacher.

Prior experience which comes from speech activities may be much more extensive. The student who participates for several months in debate, for example, may also take a semester-long debate class. This student would seem an ideal candidate for advanced placement. However, activities experience may also be limited. For example, some students may have the one-half semester speech class and compete in Oral Interpretation contests. The competition may be quite limited, however, due to the qualifying requirements of tournaments. For those students fortunate enough to have year-long forensics schedules, the competition seems to be sufficient to warrant advanced placement. The above rationale should be tempered by a number of things. It is unsupported by quantitative data. Rather, it is much like having a student request exemption from a basic course, in that the person evaluating the exemption request must evaluate the request, based on the descriptions given by the students. Our program sets and maintains minimum academic standards, and then evaluates the coursework or activities taken by each student. We also have a provision
for contacting the high school faculty member for validation of the experiences of an individual student. Unlike math and English at our University, we do not have a recognized placement or CLEP test to assess student ability.

Class size would seem to make a difference in the validity of class standing as a prerequisite of advanced placement. Small high schools, despite what a transcript reveals, may not provide a depth of academic training. The predictive ability of college entrance exams is also in serious question. Experience is more subjectively evaluated. "Debating" to some students is one tournament – to others it may include winning the state tournament. Despite these qualifications, some combination of academic record and experience should provide a sound basis for advanced placement. The material that follows describes a system of selecting students for advanced placement.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROCEDURES

This system of advanced placement program has a long history. As early as 1965, students with prior training were selected to participate in the advanced placement program. The program has been modified over the years, but the description that follows reflects current practice.

Students are invited to apply for advanced placement in speech communication under a strictly regulated set of standards. This system in not an exemption system. That is, the speech requirement is not waived, but it is altered. Policy specifies that “Advanced placement refers to the procedure by which a student with prior departmental approval completes specified courses in lieu of the Fundamentals of Speech core requirement and receives credit for both Fundamentals of Speech and the advanced course(s) after course(s) is/are successfully completed.”

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Within this policy guideline, students are invited in June to apply for placement in an advanced class. Such students are selected by analysis of a computer printout which gives the department high school coursework grades in math, English, social science and natural science. Each of the three applicable areas of the ACT is reflected by score, as is the composite score. The printout also provides information about the student's participation in speech activities and indicates if the student received any awards. The last two items of information are simply yes-no responses, so they must be treated moderately. To be invited, a student must score 24 or above on the ACT composite score. This is the primary index which begins the invitation process. However, if a student has a lower ACT and excellent grades and some indication of participation, she or he may be invited to apply for advanced placement. The computer printout is simply an aid to identify prospective students who may be eligible.

Specifically, the policy states that:

"All students granted advanced placement must meet the following preliminary requirements.

1. Provide the Departmental Administrator of the Department of Speech with evidence of appropriate prior speech experience – including a high school level course in speech and/or extensive professional speech experience. And,

2. Have achieved a composite ACT score of not less than 24 or be ranked in the upper 25 percent of their high school graduating class."

When the invitation is extended to prospective students, documentation of material in the two categories above is submitted.

If the student accepts the invitation to apply for advanced placement in speech communication, and if she/he meets the
departmental requirements for advanced placement, the Department Head determines the course(s) the student may take to satisfy the University oral communication requirement. Figure 1 includes the form used to notify the student and other necessary parties of advanced placement in speech.

The application of __________________ for advanced standing in Speech has been approved. On order to achieve Advanced Placement Credit, this student must take at least 3 credit hours chosen from the course(s) checked below in fulfillment of the University Speech Requirement. (Credit hours are in parentheses.) Upon completion of the approved course(s), the student must apply for Advanced Placement Credit in SpCm 101.

- Acting (3)
- Theatre Activities Acting (only 1)
- Interpersonal Communication (2)
- Debate (3)
- Forensic Activities (only 1)
- Public Speaking (3)
- Argumentation (3)
- Oral Interpretation (3)
- Discussion (3)
- Parliamentary Procedure (2)

APPROVED:

_______________________________
Head, Department of Speech

cc: Admissions and records
Dean of Student's College
Advisor
Student

Figure 1. Notification of Advanced Standing in Speech
Thus, the application procedure and the courses allowed are strictly followed. A student may not take an advanced course for placement credit without invitation.

The above list reflects the only courses that are allowed to satisfy the University requirement. It should be noted that the policy of the department established a priority list of the order in which a student would place. The department feels that the following courses most accurately reflect the philosophy and direction of the basic course, and thus, most students would be channeled into this group of courses:

- Public Speaking
- Debate
- Forensic Activities (not more than 1 credit)
- Argumentation
- Discussion

For students with extensive experience in the above courses, advanced placement might be granted for the following courses:

- Interpersonal Communication
- Oral Interpretation
- Parliamentary Procedure

Only in rare cases are students allowed to take the two theatre courses to satisfy the basic speech requirement.

The invitation and placement process is completed prior to summer registration for incoming freshmen. It should be mentioned that an important part of the placement procedure is based on some subjective criteria. The department feels comfortable with assessing the experience of the student based on his or her classroom teacher or coach. The department is extremely active in high school forensics and in the state speech association and generally we know the high
school teacher or coach. That knowledge often gives accurate indication of the training of the student.

If this procedure seems "paperwork intensive," it is not. The department receives a printout of students admitted to the University. This printout arrives in early June, and reflects several things about the student. We are most concerned about the ACT score at this time. Those with high enough scores are identified by the department head, and a personalized letter is sent which explains the program and invites them to apply for placement. They are required to respond so that they can avoid enrolling for Speech 101 during summer registration. The process is fairly well-tuned and actually takes little time to accomplish. After the invitation is extended to the student, the impetus to complete the process is on the student. It also allows early, often personal interaction with students.

Placing Advanced Students

After the invitation process, placement of students is somewhat subjective. The department head evaluates the form returned by the student. The following criteria are applied in the placement process.

1. Students who had no speech experience are informed that they are not eligible, despite the invitation.

2. A student who has a classroom speech course will be invited to enroll in courses such as public speaking, debate, argumentation or discussion. These courses reflect the philosophy of the basic course.

3. Students who have theatre activities experience will be invited to enroll in the same courses. Their experience already includes theatre, and they would not be placed there.
4. Students with debate experience will be allowed to take discussion, oral interpretation or theatre.

5. Students with oral interpretation experience will be invited to take public speaking, debate, argumentation or discussion.

6. Students with an extensive amount of experience may be allowed to take interpersonal communication, as well as the others.

7. The activities courses (one credit) are used sparingly.

The philosophy of placement is to expose the student to an oral communication course which will enhance previous communication experiences. If a student has concentrated on one type of activity, he or she is invited to take coursework in other areas. If the student has extensive classroom and activities experience, the interpersonal communication course is elected.

When the student has completed the advanced course, she or he is responsible for verifying completion and having the satisfaction of the University requirement properly documented. This is done by securing the Advanced Placement Form from the Testing Office and having the Head of the Department of Speech verify completion and the grade for the advanced course. Credit is then granted for Fundamentals of Speech (the basic course). The student need not complete the advanced placement process during the freshman year, but the course should be completed by the end of the sophomore year.

**Disadvantages of the System**

Like any system, the advanced placement system has certain disadvantages. Fortunately, they are not over-
whelming, as is evidenced by the long life of the program. One problem is that students feel compelled to take the advanced course in their first semester of college. In many cases, despite academic predictors and experience, students may not be mature enough to do advanced work. The basic theoretical concepts are the same in the Public Speaking class for example, but the intensity of the assignments and performances often overwhelm the freshman student. Often it is less their ability that causes the problem, but thrown in with juniors and seniors often gives them attitudinal problems. Often, it is also their attitude about other advanced placement students. Some freshmen are clearly better students than some of the juniors or seniors. Nonetheless, some ask if they should drop because of perceptions of the other students. One or two semesters of maturing often helps the student in the advanced courses.

Another disadvantage of the system is that qualified students “slip through the cracks.” For some reason they do not get invited to apply for advanced placement, or they choose to simply meet the University requirement by taking the basic course. In the former case, students simply may not appear on the computer printout, which would eliminate early invitations from the department. Another facet of this problem is that the ACT score may be too low to justify an invitation to apply, but the student may be in the upper one-quarter of his or her high school class. The problem is that the initial indicator for invitation may limit access to qualified students.

Other students may have the academic qualifications and the experience to succeed in an advanced course but for some reason chooses to enroll in the basic course. Often these students are concerned with the difficulty of the advanced course and feel that the first course is easier and will protect their grade point average. Obviously these are precisely the types of students who should take the advanced course, for it
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is likely that they would do well and gain valuable experience from it.

A third disadvantage may be more applicable to this particular department. As the list of courses suggests, there are ten courses that may be selected for advanced placement. Only two of these are activities courses. Of the eight remaining, some are rarely selected. It would be advantageous to the system and the student to have more courses theoretically and philosophically closer to the basic course. This may not be a disadvantage in speech departments with more offerings. Our courses are largely of a service nature, and this limits the addition of courses which may be of benefit to the advanced student.

A final disadvantage exists. Many of the students who apply for and receive advanced placement are high school forensics students. They are trained in certain communication styles, which most of the department faculty agree are inappropriate for the communication classroom. These students are advised of this, and often take the advanced course later in their academic career. When "competitive" communication behaviors arise in classes, they are not rewarded. Many of the faculty have a competitive background as well, and can easily modify forensics behavior to more appropriate communication for the classroom audience. Since these students often have stronger analytical skills than their peers in the advanced classes, they become positive role models. Most are able to change their delivery easily. Thus, the students are often the best of the advanced classes.

Advantages of the Advanced Placement Program

The long life of the system of advanced placement also attests to its advantages. A primary advantage of the
program is that it is not an exemption system. No student is completely free of some University level speech experience.

Beyond this, a key advantage is that qualified students usually end up in a speech class which expands their knowledge and experience in oral communication. Placement of the student in an advanced course is usually done by the department head to ensure that the student is not repeating prior experience. For example, a student who had a debate class for one semester in high school would probably be placed in a class other than debate. Most students are placed in the Public Speaking course, because its theoretical level is sufficiently high, and the oral performances and written work are extensive.

The program also exposes students to speech activities who might otherwise elect to avoid them. Those college students with background in the activities may elect not to participate because of time commitments, etc. However, if the participation partially satisfies the University requirement, some added incentive is available to the student. This advantage is, however, a minor one.

There is also a substantial advantage to the department from the advanced placement system. Since 1981, two hundred ninety-one students have accepted the invitation and taken advanced courses within the department. Our basic courses enroll between between 1200 and 1500 per year, so at least one section of the basic course is not taught, in favor of upper level courses. The total University population averages about 6500, and freshman enrollment is about 1500. The number who take advantage of advanced placement, compared to the basic course and total University enrollment is quite small.

In some cases, such as the junior level Public Speaking course, this makes the difference of a section a year. Other courses also are easier to fill because of the advanced students. By having added enrollment in the advanced courses, senior faculty are able to teach in areas of specialty.
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Advanced placement students increase the total advanced course enrollments in the department. A parallel advantage is that many of these students are so advanced that they are fun and challenging to have in class.

Advanced placement students provide an ideal opportunity for recruiting. Students that successfully completed the high school requirement for speech and those that were involved in activities have demonstrated an interest in speech communication. Further exposure, through the advanced placement program, may encourage some students to major or minor in Speech.

There are two advantages for the student. These may seem minor, but they are worth mentioning. The first is that the advanced placement student received credit for his/her university speech requirement. This credit is recorded as satisfactory/unsatisfactory, but does not influence the GPA. Practically speaking, it is also good public relations for the department and the program. The other advantage is that the placement system tries to put the student in an advanced course which is outside his or her earlier experiences. This means that the student's communication education is broadened.

Surprisingly, there is also a financial advantage to the advanced placement system. Since the program is not an exemption program, there is no loss of credit generation. However, when the student applies for the advanced placement credit and has it satisfy the basic course requirements, he/she is required to pay a nominal processing fee. The department receives a portion of this. In a good year, your share may approximate two hundred dollars. This is a gain of funds, because no total credits are lost to the department.

Like any system, the advanced placement program has its problems. We obviously miss some qualified students, for a variety of reasons. However, the program serves the advanced student well and is a positive force in our department and for the satisfaction of the University speech...
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requirement. Placing a student in an advanced course is superior to exempting him or her from the University requirement. Other departments and colleges within the University concur. It works for us.