Validating Student Competence, Maximizing Resources, and Strengthening Spanish Programs: How AP Spanish credit policies shape the experience of Spanish-proficient college students and improve graduation rates

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For Spanish-proficient college students, an institution’s policies around what it awards as academic credit for performance on the Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish language examination may be a deciding factor in determining whether a student graduates within targeted time-to-degree parameters, whether students select certain majors or minor programs, and how smoothly students transition from secondary to tertiary education. At Sonoma State University, extensive research over the past decade has shown that Spanish-proficient students who are awarded AP Spanish credit, the vast majority of whom are Latinx, outperform university norms in 4-year and 6-year graduation rates, effectively eliminating and even inverting the achievement gap in graduation rates.

Several facts pertaining to AP credit policies are well established in the literature, including that granting level-appropriate credit for the AP Spanish Language Exam is a positive factor in student recruitment (Fares, Forbes, Reeder, 2008) and that students who earn credit for AP performance are more likely to take further sequent courses in Spanish in college and to outperform those who did not take the AP exam (Murphy, Dodd, 2009).

The AP Spanish Exams

Every year, in US public and private high schools as well as in international high schools worldwide, students take the College Board’s Advanced Placement Spanish Examinations. In 2019, over 215,000 students took an AP Spanish exam with over 187,000 taking the Spanish Language and Culture Examination while another 29,000 took the Spanish Literature and Culture Examination. For many students the exam represents the culmination of many years of study, and more often than not this formal study is coupled with a heritage language background in Spanish. It is not an understatement to note that AP Spanish students generally represent the highest academic and linguistic abilities in Spanish from among their peer group. The Spanish language exam elicits and probes a wide range of language skill and competence by including a
variety of question types, with multiple choice questions as well as free response prompts that require the student to produce sophisticated oral and written responses. Student exams are scored by a large team of over a thousand college faculty and high school AP teachers who are trained and monitored to apply scoring guidelines; each student’s exam is scored by at least four different raters and those scores are combined with the multiple choice results and converted into a composite AP score of 1-5, with the scores of 3, 4, and 5 being validated through ongoing research as having statistically significant correlations with performance in comparable college courses. Specifically, the AP Spanish language exam’s content is set at the level of a fourth semester college course. The exam is criterion-referenced, meaning that scores represent a specific and clearly defined proficiency and achievement level - the exam is not graded on a curve.

Having a level-appropriate Spanish Language AP credit policy can provide a positive contribution to student recruitment, retention, and time-to-degree and can also be a factor in reducing or eliminating achievement gaps among certain underrepresented minority (URM) populations. As one example, Sonoma State University, a medium sized suburban public university that is part of the California State University, the nation’s largest public university system, has found over the past decade that a desirable consequence of a level-appropriate policy for AP Spanish credit has been to markedly decrease time-to-degree for students to the extent that the achievement gap in measured graduation rates is reduced or even inverted. In the following sections, this paper explains how the level-appropriate AP Spanish credit policy at Sonoma State has eliminated the achievement gap in 4-year and 6-year graduation rates among Latinx students entering the university as First-Time, First-year (FTF) students while at the same time resulting in two-fold increase in the number of students who have joined the Spanish program.

**AP affects recruitment at both the institutional and the departmental level.**

Research shows that many high school students indicate that AP credit policies at schools to which they are applying are a factor in their decision about where they apply and attend (Morris and Jacklin, 2018) and that once they arrive on campus their AP exam-taking history correlates with selection of college major (Mattern et al., 2011). Consequently, an institution with a credit policy that is seen as favorable may have a relative advantage in recruiting students vis-à-vis an institution with a less favorable policy. The Spanish program at Sonoma State has identified a number of students who have stated that the institution’s AP Spanish credit policy was a deciding or contributing factor in their admissions decision. Along with selecting a university, students must also choose a field to pursue as an academic major. Since fewer than 1% of US university students overall major in Spanish, and fewer than 5% of students who take the AP Spanish exams declare Spanish as a major, there is an opportunity to recruit students from among the remaining 95% who have language skills but who don’t declare Spanish – these students may still be interested in taking elective classes in Spanish, pursuing a minor, or even declaring a second major. Awarding level-appropriate AP credit is a way to incentivize participation in a Spanish program because it validates what students already know, credits their performance, places them in courses at a linguistically and academically appropriate level, and gives them a great jump start on a minor or double major. At
Sonoma State, a tremendous increase in student interest in the Spanish program as a minor field of study or as a second major was sparked by a 2008 overhaul of the AP Spanish Credit policy which began when it became apparent that the prior policy had not been reviewed or revised in decades. As a result of this overhaul, during which departmental faculty studied the AP, external recommendations, program outcomes, and student abilities, and agreed upon a more appropriate set of alignments between AP scores and course placements, the current policy was established, significantly increasing AP credit awarded and raising the placement levels. By increasing the amount of AP Spanish credit that was awarded to students and simultaneously sending advising messages to students with AP Spanish credit asking them to arrange a meeting with a Spanish faculty advisor, the Spanish program went from having stable but unremarkable enrollments prior to 2008 to its current status as the single most popular declared minor in the entire university as well as a top-20 major.

**Defining a level-appropriate credit policy**

A level-appropriate credit policy is defined as one which is reasoned, researched, and justified with evidence. It views students as the most important stakeholders in the process and places them at the appropriate academic level based on their ability and performance. Along with appropriate placement, a level-appropriate policy awards credit for each of the prerequisite courses which subsume the designated placement level. For example, if a program decides that a score of 3 on the AP Spanish exam warrants placement in the 3rd semester course, the institution should also award credit for the 1st and 2nd semester courses. Of course, not all universities share the same characteristics, not all Spanish programs share the same goals, nor are all student populations homogeneous. For those obvious reasons, the process of arriving at a level-appropriate credit policy may differ from one institution to another. A public university would be expected to award more credit for an AP Spanish score than a for-profit institution because it is in the direct interest of the public university to maximize efficiencies around the use of public funds and to avoid duplicating instruction of content that the student has already mastered. Conversely, it may indeed be in the interests of a for-profit institution to minimize awarded credit in order to maximize revenue obtained through enrollments and the associated tuition remittances. In public institutions with structures in place for shared governance and faculty control over academic matters, the faculty retain authority over the curriculum, an authority that sometimes must be asserted.

When setting credit policies and negotiating with university officials, Spanish faculty should be aware of the fact that whereas most AP subject exams are the equivalent of the introductory college course in the discipline (e.g. AP Biology is Biology 101), the World Language exams are set at a higher level, specifically at the fourth semester college course. For that reason, campus-wide ‘one-size-fits-all’ AP credit policies that are identical across all disciplines are inappropriate for AP Spanish – and indeed, for any AP World Language – because a student with a score of 3, 4, or 5 has demonstrated mastery of content that is well beyond Spanish 101. It is also useful to consider the performance of current students who have taken the AP exam and to consider asking your university’s institutional records specialists for data on performance from past examinees – at Sonoma State, for example, we can see what grades were earned in subsequent courses from each (anonymized) student who had taken AP Spanish exams since 2007. Finally, the College Board website has useful tools such as its page on “AP and College
Enrollment” to help guide the conversation in your program, the AP Course and Exam descriptions are available online, and the College Board can generate campus-specific score reports that reveal useful information such as how many students are sending AP Spanish scores to the institution, how well they are performing, and what their demographics are.

**Trend toward more academic credit awarded for AP Spanish**

An important distinction exists between ‘placement’ and ‘credit’ based on a student’s AP scores. With respect to placement, an institution or department uses a student’s AP score as a placement guide to automatically place students into a particular course level. Although some institutions place students into a specific course based solely on whether or not an AP score is ‘passing’, a more sophisticated placement framework for the Spanish exam (and other World Languages exams) provides for a scaled placement paradigm based on each score point. For example, placement to the 3rd semester course with a score of 3, placement in the 4th semester course with a score of 4, and placement to the 5th semester course with a score of 5. Along with setting placement thresholds, a program and/or an institution also sets a credit policy to codify the specific amount of academic credit that is awarded for specific performance levels on the exam. Institutions may apply AP credit to elective units, as credit toward general education requirements, or toward other specific requirements such as a language requirement. Institutions may also elect to limit the total number of units toward baccalaureate requirements that are awarded for exam credit. Since there is now general consensus that AP Spanish exams are accurate and reliable indicators of student performance and competence, an ever-increasing number of institutions are awarding credit for AP Spanish language. As of 2019, 97% of all public baccalaureate-granting institutions awarded AP Spanish Language credit. Even among institutions classified as Public Flagships, 96% of all the institutions awarded credit for AP Spanish Language in 2019. These figures suggest that an overwhelming majority of all public institutions of higher education award credit for AP Spanish language.

**Setting a Credit and Placement Policy**

Spanish programs that are overly restrictive in designating course placement run the risk of discouraging students from continuing language study by placing them in courses that don’t challenge or stimulate the student, leading to boredom and disaffection. Unnecessarily low placements also result in inappropriate and inefficient use of the university’s resources when students are required to take courses that deliver content which has already been taught to them in high school and over which they have already demonstrated mastery through the AP exam. Indeed, during ACTFL President Rita Oleksak’s 2007 US Senate testimony she suggested that as much as $459,000 goes “down the drain” at just one university because of students enrolling in language classes below the appropriate level. Having an appropriate AP credit policy can not only avoid redundancy and duplication, it saves the institution precious resources. A case in point was identified during an analysis of academic credits awarded by Sonoma State University for AP Spanish exams during the 2015-16 academic year which suggested that over $1.3 million
in cost savings was attributable to academic credit obtained from credit awarded to students for scores of 3, 4, and 5 on the AP Spanish exam.

The aforementioned points provide compelling evidence for an institution to reevaluate its AP Spanish credit policy to make sure it at least conforms to the minimum recommended by the American Council for Education (ACE) (2020), which for the AP Spanish Language and Culture Examination is 6 semester units (2 semesters) for a score of 3, 9 semester units (3 semesters) for a score of 4, and 12 semester units (4 semesters) for a score of 5. For the Spanish Literature and Culture Examination, the ACE recommendation is 9 semester units (3 semesters) for a score of 3, 12 semester units (4 semesters) for a score of 4, and 12 semester units (4 semesters) for a score of 5.

A compelling reason to award level-appropriate credit

Although Latinx students are underrepresented in some AP fields, such as the STEM disciplines, Latinx students in general, and heritage speakers of Spanish in particular, constitute a majority of students taking the AP Spanish exams. This means that AP Spanish credit policies disproportionally affect Latinx students. Often, university credit policies are inadvertently unfavorable toward World Language exams by applying a one-size-fits-all approach or by limiting credit for individual exams. Consider the following hypothetical example.

Reviewing the AP exam credit policy at one large public comprehensive university in Southern California with a “one-size-fits-all” approach to AP scores shows how this kind of policy can have the unintended consequence of adversely affecting a subpopulation of Latinx students, namely those with AP Spanish credit. This consequence results in the exacerbation and perpetuation of achievement gaps in graduation rates between Latinx and non-URM students. Examine a hypothetical case of two high school students, both coming from the same large public urban high school in Southern California. One of the two students had an aptitude and interest in STEM fields (we shall call her “Ellen”, in homage to astronaut Ellen Ochoa) while the other had an early aptitude and interest in language (we will call him “Luis”, after poet Luis Rodriguez). Focusing in the sciences, Ellen takes AP Computer Science Principles her first year of high school, AP Biology her second year, AP Chemistry her third year, and AP Calculus her fourth year. She took each AP exam and scored a 5 on each one. Meanwhile, Luis took Spanish for Heritage Speakers his first year of high school, a literacy-skill building Spanish for Heritage Speakers class his second year, AP Spanish Language his third year, and AP Spanish Literature his fourth year. He took both AP Spanish exams and scored a 5 on both of them. Both Ellen and Luis are accepted to the (unnamed) university in this hypothetical example, which has a one-size-fits-all policy imposing an upper limit of 6 units of credit for any one AP exam, regardless of the academic level of the exam. Ellen is awarded a total of 21 units for her quadfecta and she is credited with a total of four distinct General Education requirements. Luis, meanwhile, is awarded a total of 12 units and is credited with only one General Education requirement. Under the existing policy, Luis will persistently be nearly a semester behind Ellen in time-to-degree, and he will also face the related consequences such as having lower registration priority due to his lower number of total units. Instead, what if that campus adopted an AP credit policy that followed the ACE recommendations for all of the AP exams listed above? If that were the case,
Ellen would be awarded 24 units and Luis also would be awarded 24 units, a more equitable outcome.

Case Study: Sonoma State University AP Spanish Credit Policy

The institution arrived at its current policy because of the efforts of Spanish program faculty members. During the mid-2000s the topic of AP credit and placement came up in departmental conversation and none of the then members of the Sonoma State Spanish program faculty could recall ever updating or evaluating the program’s AP credit and placement policy. As is the case in many Spanish programs around the country, the program had simply inherited a policy from an earlier era, a policy that had not been reexamined, which was simply to award 6 units of elective Spanish credit for any passing AP score. The program faculty realized that the former policy was neither relevant nor applicable to the program’s needs, so after careful research the following policy was developed:

AP Spanish Language & Culture Exam (Test Code 87), Sonoma State University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Credit Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Credit for SPAN 101, 102 (8 units)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Credit for SPAN 101, 102, 201 (12 units)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Credit for SPAN 101, 102, 201, 202 (16 units)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This policy, although it differs somewhat from the ACE recommendation, was developed with faculty input and careful analysis of institutional data showing how students with AP scores were performing in Spanish classes at various levels. The policy serves the program’s needs well because it aligns course objectives with score points on the AP Spanish Exam. Furthermore, a separate policy covers AP Spanish Literature, for which students earn 4 units of credit for SPAN 305 (Introduction to Literature) and an additional 2 elective units toward the major. Over a decade ago, once the department developed the policy and submitted it to the appropriate administrative authorities for implementation, it led to profound changes for the program, all of which have been positive.

On average, between 120-150 new first-year students per year arrive on campus with AP Spanish credit, with the most common scores being 4 or 5, and often with the additional score from the Spanish literature exam. The mean number of AP Spanish units awarded to students upon entry is 15.7 units. Since 2008, the year that this policy took full effect, the program has been collecting longitudinal data on the impact of the AP Spanish policy on specific subsets of the student population in partnership with the office of Reporting and Analytics. By studying student demographic characteristics as well as 4-year and 6-year graduation rates and other metrics of academic performance, Sonoma State has found that FTF students entering with AP Spanish credit are overwhelmingly Latinx, perform at similar academic levels as their peer cohort, and are more likely to graduate in 4 or 6 years than Latinx students without AP credit or even the overall student body. Here are the numbers:
• In 2015, 89% of FTF AP Spanish credit awardees at Sonoma State were Latinx (Latinx FTF students were 27.6% of the entering class of 2015). By 2017 the proportion of Latinx students with AP Spanish credit had increased to 94% of all FTF students with AP Spanish credit, reflecting demographic trends.
• In 2015, AP Spanish credit awardees were otherwise academically similar to the overall population with a mean 3.00 GPA after the first semester for students with AP Spanish credit vs. a mean 2.95 GPA for the overall student body. By 2017 these figures were a 2.84 mean GPA for the AP Spanish credit cohort and a mean 2.85 for the overall student body.
• In 2015, 11.7% of FTF with AP Spanish credit were placed on academic probation after the first semester vs. 10.9% for the overall student body.

The above data points establish that students entering Sonoma State with AP Spanish credit are overwhelmingly Latinx and are nearly identical to their peers in terms of first semester GPA and first semester academic success. These points are important to contextualize and understand the following student success metrics:

• 36% of the entering class of 2009 with AP Spanish credit graduated within 4 years
• 28% of the entire entering class of 2009 graduated within 4 years
• 20% of Latinx population within the entering class of 2009 but without AP Spanish credit graduated within 4 years

• 65% of the entering class of 2009 with AP Spanish credit graduated within 6 years
• 59% of the entire entering class of 2009 graduated within 6 years
• 53% of Latinx population within the entering class of 2009 but without AP Spanish credit graduated within 6 years

As a result of a level-appropriate credit policy, Spanish-proficient students who are awarded AP Spanish credit, the vast majority of whom are Latinx, outperform the university averages in 4-year and 6-year graduation rates, effectively eliminating and even inverting the achievement gap in graduation rates for Latinx students with AP Spanish exam credit.

These data conclusively illustrate that Sonoma State’s AP Spanish credit policy is an effective way to decrease time to graduation and close the achievement gap for Latinx students. Given the strong curricular reasons for updating AP Spanish policies as well as the compelling equity evidence, it is strongly recommended that other institutions carefully consider adopting similar policies. Over the course of Sonoma State’s 11 years of experience with the above credit levels, the program has discovered that the AP Spanish credit policy attracts students to the university and to the program; indeed, within the last decade Spanish has become the most popular minor on campus. The program faculty agree that the AP Spanish placement policy is accurate at placing students in the correct level, and an analysis of university records of student academic performance in sequent courses beyond the AP credit level shows that the average course GPA of students who place into Spanish 300 (“Advanced Spanish Language”) by virtue of their AP score of 5 is higher than the average course GPA of students who have reached Spanish 300 by taking the sequence of prerequisite courses. Perhaps most importantly, the institution has discovered that the AP Spanish credit policy positively impacts Latinx students with Spanish language background in terms of eliminating the graduation rate achievement gap for that
population of students. For those reasons, this paper asserts that Sonoma State’s policy of tiered, level-appropriate AP Spanish credit is replicable and appropriate to implement in universities across the United States. Furthermore, this policy is not only in the best interest of the Spanish-proficient student population, it is also responsible, efficient, equitable, and serves as an excellent tool for recruiting and retaining prospective Spanish-proficient students to a university’s Spanish program.

Works Cited


