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## **Book Review: Abrams, A. (2023). *Shortchanged. How Advanced Placement Cheats Students*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

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A much-needed thorough analysis of the validity of the powerful cultural and institutional role of the Advanced Placement exams is clarified right from the start: “Much of today’s discussion about the decline of the liberal arts centers on the undergraduate experience: tracking applications to liberal arts colleges and enrollments in majors, navigating the relationship between humanities and STEM requirements.” (pp. 3-4) This is how Annie Abrams begins her highly engaging and argumentative presentation of a contemporary issue regarding the mission of the Advanced Placement (AP) programs. With a quick self-assessment of her experience as a college instructor, the author recalls that “teaching writing was social,” which also relates beautifully to basic values embedded in student writing: “Clarity, innovation, investment, and enthusiasm all contributed to an essay quality.” (p. 4)

However, the transition from teaching liberal arts college courses and “navigating” the Advanced Placement program did not, as she mentioned in her introduction, seem to be as smooth as she had expected. The two goals of her literature course were meant to develop a working relationship with her students: “helping students take their own minds seriously and giving them a specific – and often competing – tools to perform well on a high-stakes test at the end of the year.” (ibid.) While teaching eleventh-grade Advanced Placement English Language, she soon discovered that the College Board had revised the English essay rubrics, which, in her opinion, “are now almost exactly the same.” Instead of developing meaningful thoughts, students are now more concerned about “the requisite number of words per minute per point.” And that is what prompted Annie Abrams to tackle the present project.

Organized in two sections, with *Part I. Validity*, and *Part II. Accountability*, the current volume of research also includes an Introduction (already mentioned) discussing the collection data, a *Conclusion*, delineating *Opportunity* and *Transparency*, followed by an *Epilogue* suggesting *Formative Assessments*. We should also include the *Acknowledgements* section, the necessary details and explanations in *Notes*, plus an invaluable *Index* to round up the book.

The exhaustive introduction provides commentaries on useful information about the College Board, with its national curriculum “that holds not only high schools, but also universities, to the company’s academic standards and its philosophy of education.” (p. 6) A quick incursion into the history of the Advanced Placement Program elucidates relevant references to years like 1956, when “1229 students from 104 schools sat for 2,199 exams that 130 colleges would consider for credit in freshman courses.” (p. 12) The historical perspective segues to the 1940s and early 1950s, when “academics at some of the nation’s prominent colleges and universities conceived of the nation’s expanding public education system as an instrument to strengthen the body politic.” (ibid.)

If we fast-forward to 2020, we read that “exams in English courses comprised the largest numbers of tests administered by the College Board. With 573,171 test takers, AP English Language was the most popular exam on offer; 380,136 students sat for an exam in AP English Literature.” (p. 15) In this context, when numbers speak volumes, the author argues that the College Board’s partnership with *Finetune*, “a startup aiming at ‘objectively’ grade essays using artificial intelligence, is a disaster for secondary English education.” (ibid.) In her own words, the author finds that “The College Board’s approach to education is antidemocratic.” (p. 16)

Based on a critical approach to Harvard President James Conant and his outstanding contributions, *Chapter 1* delineates several intellectual influences that are clearly visible in the vision offered by Conant on September 18, 1936 at the school’s tercentenary celebration, in which he vowed to lead “the development of a national culture based on the study of the past,” for which “one condition is essential – absolute freedom of expression, absolutely unmolested inquiry,” (p. 19) words he would repeat in his future debates and writings, thereby trying to “temper political and cultural chaos.” The author describes Conant as “calm, meticulous, and self-possessed” because he liked things to be organized. Throughout his career in education, “he understood education reform as the means to protect democracy from Communism by promoting both class fluidity and intelligent, humanistic liberalism.” (p. 21)

A brief but relevant comparison with John Dewey proffers notable opinions regarding reforms which led Conant to opine that “I am struck with the way the new ideas fit the new problems as a key fits a lock ... After closing John Dewey’s volume, *Democracy and Education*, I had the feeling that, like the Austro-Hungarian empire of the nineteenth century, if John Dewey hadn’t existed he would have had to be invented.” (ibid.) Both of them “believed that American education should facilitate class mobility,” and both “argued that American education should aid in the development of democratic attitudes, though they differed in approach.” (p. 22)

According to Annie Abrams, a major component of Conant’s creative powers lies in his strong belief “that schools could become nodes of democracy in action, cultivating both academic and vocational talents under one roof while facilitating respect among students of diverse backgrounds, interest, and aptitudes.” (p. 23) Besides Dewey, other names are mentioned to complement Conant’s persona, and Thomas Jefferson’s ideas led Conant when he called for unification behind Jefferson’s vision for American life. Although controversial, Jefferson’s comments in *Notes of the State of Virginia* sounded like a warning:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it.... This quality is the germ of all education in him. (p. 27)

However, this was only one of the many instances that crafted research-based recommendations that were necessary to warn against declining public interest in education. Differences and commonalities played an important role in defining new ideas and reforms. As stated in the Educational Policies Commission’s reports, “All American youth are citizens,” “all American youth are now living in the American culture,” “all American youth have the capacity to think rationally.” (p. 33) In other words, standardization was resisted because a democratic education was envisioned as an “integrated network, with all of its constituents imbued with vitality, ambition, and agency.” (ibid.)

In the 1930s and 1940s, as stated in the book, various approaches to academic education were debated between famous professors like Jacques Barzun at Columbia University, Sidney Hook at Stanford University, and reporter Walter Lipmann – who all defended the humanistic approach to education. By the same token, Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, the president and a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, championed “the centering the transmission of a coherent American cultural heritage.” General and vocational education as envisioned by Hutchinson was not exactly what John Dewey had intended to promote, says the author, mostly because he deemed culture and vocation inseparable. However, by 1952, both of them agreed that “a major goal of American education should be helping students become workers with firm understandings of the meaning of their work, both personally and for the sake of society.” (p. 35)

A middle path was found when the authors of *General Education in a Free Society* voiced their main concern about general education being so adapted to different ages, differing abilities and outlooks and still appeal to everybody. In their views, education programs should strongly defend cultural heritage:

Through required courses in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, students would become acquainted with disciplines other than their own, and would be the richer as individuals, no matter their occupations. (p. 36)

Along the same lines we find Conant’s support for liberal education. In a series of lectures delivered at Yale University in 1945, he supported the teaching of science in school and college. “Whether we have ... intelligence enough to proceed with the next stage in the development of civilization will in part depend on education.” He went on to say that:

This fact in itself would be justification enough for all of us who spend our lives trying to explore new and better ways of ‘perpetuating learning to posterity. (Conant, *On Understanding Science: An Historical Approach*, 1947) (Quoted on p. 37)

Conant’s words were basically drawn from an analogy between careers in science and in the military. Furthermore, he sought to explain to his readers the endless possibilities of a society “would have the minimum interest in his own or other people’s occupational status, the maximum interest in how far his own or other people’s conduct approximated the universally recognized ethical ideal.” Reading between the lines we may detect his life experience, Jefferson’s ‘laws of nature’ mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, as well as the threat of Communism after the Great Depression and World War II. All these must have led him to believe that the public education system should be “the product of our special history, a concrete manifestation

of our unique ideals, and the vehicle by which the American concept of democracy may be transmitted to our future citizens.” (p. 38) *The New York Times* acknowledged Conant’s contributions after his death in 1978, when the AP program had already been put in place by a leader in education reform.

Woven into the multi-layered *Chapter 2. Common Standards and Common Purposes*, the reader finds relevant information about people who continued the promotion of liberal education. Alan Blackmer is mentioned to have persevered along the same lines and, therefore, remained in the minds of his students. His work on annotated editions of literature works added to his “unrecorded acts of kindness and goodwill.” When reforms in education become the focus of attention, The Ford Foundation positioned itself along those who articulated the founding principles connecting its private interests and the public good. Their trustees defined their work as complementary to government because “the most important problems in contemporary life lay in man’s relationship to man.” <https://www.fordfoundation.org/media/2411/1950-annual-report.pdf.17>.

The relationship between school and college, as stated in the book, is masterfully addressed by the foundation’s Fund for the Advancement of Education. Their report on this issue found certain deficiencies which could be explained if we looked at three reasons: “dulling of student interest in learning, a downgrading of educational results, and a waste of human resources.” (Quoted on p. 50) As such, enriching education is touted as a necessary goal in a society where domestic cultivation of liberalism is as important as “capitalizing on students’ abilities for a global fight.” (ibid.) Woven into the same education tapestry we find the Ford Foundation, the Fund for the Advancement of Education, and the Aspen Institute, where “industrialists would use liberal arts training to grapple with the problem under consideration at places like Harvard Business School during Donald K. David’s tenure as dean: ‘Is Private Enterprise Undermining Our Citizenry – and Itself?’” (p. 54)

If we switch back to Alan Blackmer and his impressive contributions, we find a letter he wrote on May 13, 1952, in which he expressed his personal view regarding examinations for advanced credit and which he deemed to be more valuable if they were set by an agency like the College Board rather than by college departments. When Earle G. Eley (University of Chicago) suggested grading essays on the basis of certain variables, Blackmer and his committee recommended resorting to the College Board for a project named “Advanced Subject Matter Examinations” with the following guidelines:

1. To give an incentive to the ablest students in secondary schools to progress in fields of particular interest and strength at a rate commensurate with their ability.
  2. To stimulate the secondary school to provide the best possible teaching, as well as other opportunities, for top-level students.
  3. To attack wasteful duplication of work between school and college.
  4. To give the college an effective way to keep superior, and potentially superior, students fully stretched before admission.
- (p. 65)

These were goals that were also meant to motivate students, to strengthen teaching, to eliminate tedium and repetition, to maintain students’ intellectual agility.” (ibid.) However, the project’s success was met with mixed results, and the committee finally disbanded after the report was published. Although incoherent, as postulated by the author, the effort envisioned parameters and lofty ideals, when speed and innovation were the order of the day.” (p. 70)

In keeping with similar principles purported by contemporary education supporters, the author concludes the chapter with her own admission: ‘I agree with Blackmer: liberal education can be a perennial good. But, as Bundy made clear, the structures that shape school’s meaning and import are subject to change.’” (p. 74)

*Chapters 2 and 3 of Part I* are intertwined, and, consequently, the conversation continues about equitable access to and participation in college preparation including advanced placement courses. In this vein, Kenyon president Gordon Keith Chalmers is analyzed for his involvement with the founding of the Advanced Placement program. In 1951, Chalmers is joined by William Hafner Cornog (then President of Philadelphia’s Central High School) in supporting the expansion of the possibilities for American education, and both argued for “the maintenance of qualitative thinking and believed that conceiving of education primarily in terms of economics, customer service, and data.” However, the author affirms, “data clashed with academic integrity and civic ideals.” (p. 76)

Building on Chalmers’ beliefs in norms and standards, Annie Abrams goes on to clarify his position: “The need for stories, reflection upon these, the human facts and a skeptical analysis of the record to determine where it is inadequate or false is the same for every man, as every man must have protein.” (Quoted on p. 80) Acclaim also came from conservative peers like Russell Kirk, Daniel Boorstin and Richard Weaver. Specifically, in 1963, we find a tribute published by Kirk, who asserted that Chalmers “influence will be felt in subtle ways, but it will endure long. ... He does not expect that legions will spring up where he stamps his foot. The work of the humane scholar of high talent, instead, resembles what the Apostle said of the seed – unless they die, they cannot quicken.” (Kirk, “The American Conservative Character,” *Georgia Review* 8, 1954)

As Chapter 3 develops, we find Chalmers’s writings, including articles and essays, which frame his strong support for “incorporating Protestant worship into collegiate life as an antidote to both New Deal state control and the moral relativism he worried was emerging from the Second World War.” (p. 86) Unlike some of his contemporaries, who vouched for “mass consensus at the expense of individual thought,” Chalmers “imagined that ‘the social objective for popular education’ could be ‘to bring a large number of people to the point where they can read accurately the editorials of the day.’” (p. 88)

It is through details that the book is structured, and that is through various facets of the AP program, as viewed from the perspective of scholars, academics, and politicians. This is what validates the author’s approach and can easily be detected in examples like the AP English Literature course. Specifically, as part of Cornog’s contribution to the general idea, the School and College Study at Philadelphia’s integrated Central School had its own committee that stipulated that “class sizes be limited

to fewer than twenty students so that each teacher could ‘know and deal with each of his pupils as a thinking individual.’ Furthermore, they specified that “The student should be led to regard his theme writing not as a means to an end, but as an intrinsically valuable process of mental exploration and orientation.” (*The School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing*, 1953, p. 29) (Quoted on p. 92)

In other words, the emphasis pointed to qualitative outcomes, not quantitative, whereby the discipline integrity prevailed over measurement and credentials, and as a result, instead of making it easily calculable, it obviously attached meaning to the concept of education.

Following the author’s strong belief that standardized testing does not help and consequently should be dismantled, we find vocal detractors who share the same opinion. Oberlin chemistry professor Luke Steiner was of the opinion that “Formal examinations, if emphasized, tend to distort the learning process.” (p. 93) While he supported the advanced placement and inter-institutional change, he was also aware that administrators in secondary schools and colleges would “think in terms of standards as automatic in operation as possible,” it was also his idea that “examinations act as such standards,” and that is why he warned colleagues like Chornog about the dangers to “ceding to such a system.” (ibid.)

To wrap up the chapter, the author brings additional references to clarify her stance. Talking about Baltimore’s public schools, in *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates testified about his experience of ‘education rendered as rote learning,’ in subjects like algebra, biology, and English. The logical conclusion, the author posits, is that “Now, as the Advanced Placement program grows, it is doing the opposite of what it was designed to do.” (p. 101)

The corollary of *Chapter 4. Copy Paste Classroom* is a detailed presentation of the College Board’s new digital form, AP Classroom, which, according to the author, is “a distortion of the study of history.” As such, this service “curtails teachers’ autonomy and highlights the differences between their roles and those of college instructors, as well as the nature of the instruction students receive.” This validates the concept that, instead of “claiming to eradicate the line between high school and college, the College Board actually reinforces that boundary through their new digital platform, AP Classroom.” (p. 105)

Viewed by AP Classroom supporters as a “commitment to dominance and automation,” the platform software is meant to “compensate for human teachers’ perceived limitations.” As the author contends, AP Classroom is an online resource focused on student-centered activities based on a list of features including “topic questions,” “personal progress checks,” and a “progress dashboard.” (p. 107) Although teachers have access to the platform, their participation seems unnecessary.

Compared to the real classroom experience, with a teacher’s desk, surrounded by bookcases and students sitting in chairs, the AP Classroom is conceived as a cheaper version of the real thing. On the one hand, you have a classroom where students can work together, get engaged with each other, agree, disagree, or argue; on the other hand, although the AP Classroom purpose is to “streamline, code, replicate, and expand,” according to the author, it “also distorts the subject matter.” Specifically, we find a document called *Course Framework*, which basically “attempts to fix US history into a set of stable ideas and skills that are compatible with AP Classroom’s organizational scheme.” (p.109) Being aware of such issues, the developers recommend that teachers who don’t feel comfortable with the course organization are under no obligation to use the AP suggestions.

When higher education institutions are brought into the ardent discussion, Annie Abrams finds places like Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, or Williams College – to name just a few – where credit or placement for AP US History exams are offered. Following department policy, “all first-year students are welcome to take any of the first-year seminars or tutorials (100-level courses) or any of the broad surveys (200-level courses), and can also take advanced electives (300-level courses) with the instructor’s permission.” <https://registrar.williams.edu/course-registration/placement-information/ap-placement-guide/>

Within the same context, we are next reminded that the AP Classroom founders emphasized teacher autonomy. The designers of the program were obviously aware of the threats to teachers and students that AP Classroom presents. In their view, creativity and flexibility for teachers constituted the core principle. As the author continues, we find Harlan Hanson, former director of Advanced Placement, who voiced the opinion of his peers: “When we seek teachers for the gifted, we seek people who are themselves bright and who place less emphasis on conformity and more on the unusual in learning.” (Quoted on p. 116)

Creativity and freedom of expression, as an integral component of the program, however, “should not be the preserve of the ‘gifted,’ and consequently the author decries the disadvantages of “making education designed for privileged students more like the system it was supposed to replace rather than making the rest of the system more like a program designed with highest hopes for nurturing students’ unique abilities.” (p. 116)

The focus then switches back to the present, where the AP Classroom is described as driven by the College Board’s financial interests, although its goal is to contribute to a broader cultural context. Equally balanced, like in the previous chapters, are the two sides of the argument. On the one hand, we have teachers who express their personal opinions, political or otherwise, and therefore become subjected to a certain curriculum and that implies authority. As such, teachers are not “expected to generate knowledge.” In 2007 the Seventh Circuit “decided to uphold a decision on the legality of firing a teacher because she had admitted in her classroom to protesting the Iraq War.” It was decided that “a high school teacher’s taking ownership of curriculum was a liability rather than an expectation.”

The other side of the coin is beautifully explicated when the author introduces the “conceptualization of a teacher as distinct from what they teach.” The implication would be that, if we emphasize the curriculum values, we underappreciate an instructor’s knowledge and enthusiasm. These are the opinions of Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire as they were expressed in *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*. In a nutshell, what they imply is that



Increased standardization and narrow focus on testing runs the risk of rewarding compliance rather than encouraging teachers and, in their turn, their students, to take their own minds seriously. (p. 119)

According to the author, we further realize that, instead of investing in local teachers and their capabilities, resorting to exams would indicate “an orientation toward submission to depersonalized, infallible authority.” (ibid.) In other words, mistrust in public schools would only be incentivized. If the College Board’s economic power undermines the academic world, the result is a clear danger to social relationships at the heart of education, which in itself “deepens the divide between high school and college instructors.” (p. 121)

The fervent discussion of the AP program turns into a real argument in *Chapter 5. Artificial Intelligence* where the author “demonstrates how the program fails to align with the vision for the liberal arts outlined by contemporary thinkers.” However, Chester Finn and Andrew Scanlan celebrated the AP as a definite achievement in 2019, when they declared that “a degree in English may actually do [students] greater good in the modern job market than a major in culinary services or law enforcement.” Under deep scrutiny, the main reason, in Annie Abrams’ opinion, is that “It’s current insistence on writing as a mechanical process is a disaster.” (p. 122) To prove her point, the author’s project reveals a crude awakening: Ivy Leagues like Brown, Dartmouth, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania do not offer credit or placement for the English exams, regardless of score. Moreover, Yale University and Columbia University Aps “count toward neither the English major nor the college’s distribution requirements, though scores of 5 can qualify students for elective credit.” (p. 123)

Further proof comes from Vassar College, where the English Department handbook clearly defines its philosophy: An English course is a conversation. ... The placement of a grade on the paper puts an end to this part of the conversation. A student paper is not an exam but is rather an opportunity for the student to speak on a particular subject. The instructor’s response is not a grade, but it is an informed response to what the student has said. (<https://www.vassar.edu/english/students/faq.html>.)

Similar positions on the AP program vision also come from other places, including Stanford University, where the “study of literary texts nourishes our critical minds and our imaginations.” (p. 124) Even though the College Board insists that AP programs are meant these days to be more accessible and thereby representing a step forward for the educational process, the author explicitly contradicts the new measures because AP essays measure a basic ability to conform and regurgitate, not the cultivation of subjectivity nor a meaningful understanding of the writing process.” (p. 126)

Along the same lines we find the mechanical approach to teaching reading and writing strongly defended by a scoring system called *Converge*, whose supporters, according to *Finetune*, explain that “teachers themselves come from diverse training backgrounds and experiences.” For that reason, they offer a complete reworking of the rationale behind the grading system supplanted by *Converge* that correlates with the rubrics of Common Core standards, and which “requires teachers to think of essays in terms of five separate categories: thinking, content, organization, diction/syntax, and mechanics.” (p. 129) Such an approach raises lots of eyebrows and questions the validity of quantifying writing, which “demands a level of simplification that violates the potential for essay writing to help students organize experience – their own and others.” (ibid.).

The author’s exploration of the AP program continues in the same chapter with a quick reference to the humanistic vision for AP English and its curriculum. While articulating a sound support in favor of performance standards, the author also argues that there was also a tendency to resist reductive approaches to reading and writing. Throughout the 1950s the program’s progress was traced and several conclusions were drawn. The burden was laid on teachers’ skills and “Some of the project’s early advisors recommended that in addition to giving feedback, competent teachers needed time to read and write on their own to help their students understand themselves as ‘thinking individuals.’” (p. 133) When plans were drafted for the examination, writing was not considered as a “means to an end but as an intrinsically valuable process of mental self-exploration and orientation.” (ibid.) Writing remained a staple of a liberal education in a democracy.

Part of a broad commitment to encourage a meaningful conversation of the teaching process, attention to individuals became crucial. Such a focus led W. E. B. Du Bois to affirm that “the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living – not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold.” (Quoted on p. 135.) And that, in itself, motivated the cultivation of autonomy, which also entailed the inherent concepts of equity and access. Unfortunately, as the author deftly demonstrates, several visions for the AP program “failed to account for the broad access to humanities that DuBois imagined when he defended Shakespeare as a nonjudgmental intellectual companion.” (p. 135) Democracy as the goal of liberal education implies challenging conformity provides the obvious access to education, thereby making reading and writing pleasurable and useful. Therefore, Annie Abrams opines, the move toward “accreditation and quantification for the sake of profit” makes no sense at all.

In *Chapter 6. Better Citizens*, the attention is transferred to AP US Government courses, which, as developed in 1986, were meant to “bridge the gap between high school civics and college-level government.” The new approach was hailed by, among others, Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman, who praised the program’s step forward as an achievement. He argued that the College Board’s “Coleman and Sanford concluded that it was essential that every student entering college actually have command of the First Amendment.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/opinion/college-board-sat.ap.html>.)

However, respondents were quick to react and they sounded the alarm, pointing to the unexpected results. One such example would be the response provided by a Connie L., a parent, who ventured to articulate the following:

I've not spoken with one parent over these years who doesn't see the entire College Board hold on college admission for what it is: a racket. They have created a market for their tests and wreaked havoc on what education is supposed to be, with far-reaching consequences. (Quoted on p. 139)

Instead of empowering students, as stated in the book, the College Board "infantilizes citizens," and this leads the author to pose a logical question: Does this system represent an introduction to the best of the American political tradition?" (p. 146)

The year 2011 brought a "rethinking" of the AP program, with a fresh focus prompted by teachers' and students' frustrations: consequently, in 2012 David Coleman used the experience he earned working on the Common Core standards and communicated to the *New York Times* that "We have a crisis in education, and over the next few years, the main thing on the College Board's agenda is to deliver its social mission." <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/16/education/david-coleman-to-lead-the-college-board.html>

The two sides of the argument are finally re-appraised in the concluding chapter entitled *Opportunity and Transparency*. What needs to be mentioned in this remarkable and undoubtedly valuable research project is the fact that, although there were intellectual orientations in the original vision, the author concludes that the College Board's approach is definitely antidemocratic. This book is well-prepared, well-researched, and highly opinionated, based on independent thought and creative engagement. With so much at stake these days, with time and money being the major concern, we are left to ponder how much is still to be done to bridge the gap between those who make the decisions and the students whose future well depends on well-chosen paths. The answer would be a good start for another inquisitive and introspective analysis.

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