

## **Hey, hey, Ho-Ho, AP Tests have got to go!**

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, education, and culture.

Today's Topic is Hey, hey, Ho-Ho, AP Tests have got to go!

Our first speaker today will be Patrick Allitt who is a Professor of History at Emory. Patrick is perfectly positioned to help us evaluate the AP US History exam as he has graded and written the AP Tests. Patrick has also taught the US History survey class that is available from the Teaching Company's Great Courses.

I have listened to five of Patrick's courses including The Art of Teaching, American Religious History, and The Industrial Revolution. Patrick is a regular on What Happens Next and his last podcast was on How the Railroad Made America two months ago, which is available in our archive.

I hope to learn from Patrick about the benefits of taking a US History survey class and whether the AP exam properly evaluates mastery of the subject matter. We will hear from Patrick about his views of multiple-choice exams and the proper use of essays to evaluate students.

Our second speaker will be Annie Abrams who is the author of the new book entitled Shortchanged: How Advanced Placement Cheats Students. Annie teaches AP English at the NYC magnet high school Bronx Science. We will hear from Annie about her concerns related to teaching for the AP tests, and how it affects high school English pedagogy.

Buckle up.

I took 5 AP exams in 1983 and 1984 in English, US History, European History, BC Calculus and Chemistry. I found the AP classes at my New Trier High School to be extremely rigorous, and my teachers to be exemplary. At the time, I thought the exams were brilliantly designed.

In the 40 years since I was a student, AP test taking has exploded. Today 3 million high school students sit for 5 million exams each year! Students can now choose between 39 different AP exams like economics, psychology and statistics that were not available to me.

These tests have consequences. For some it means that they can skip their introductory class in the relevant subject, and for others it might provide them a credit towards graduation. Because

of my performance on the AP tests, I was able to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania's undergraduate Wharton Business School in just 3 years. That year saved me tuition and allowed me to get to Wall Street one year earlier to earn a salary and start my progression up the corporate ladder.

AP exams also mitigate senioritis. Second semester senior year has always been problematic. Since grades do not matter in the college admissions process, most students' check-out. But with multiple AP tests to take in May, those high school students hoping to get college credit have to be fully engaged to master a lot of material to pass these exams.

America spends \$20 billion on its public schools just to educate seniors in their second semester. Let's find creative ways to engage these kids so that they don't just coast through that last year.

Patrick, do you support the teaching of a broad survey course like AP US History?

Patrick Allitt:

I think the goal is a very laudable one. It's a good idea for every American student to have a narrative knowledge of the history of his or her own country. Even though Americans sometimes say, especially to me a Brit, that American history is very short. There's a very great deal to be learned, but it's important to learn it and it's worthwhile. I applaud the effort to teach a continuous narrative. Introductory courses which do that are useful. And I think the advanced placement test is useful.

Larry Bernstein:

The AP US History curriculum and examination have questions about geography, include a variety of important dates, major events and critical documents in the American story. How do you feel about these choices?

Patrick Allitt:

It's vital for students to learn dates. They've gradually become more and more unpopular because teachers know that students don't like them. But that's ridiculous. If you haven't got the dates, you haven't got anything, because you need to know when things happened before you can possibly understand what happened or why it happened. So that's absolutely vital. Similarly, the geography is imperative, especially with somewhere as big as the United States. If you don't know where things happened, you simply can't possibly understand why it happened. Not knowing the course of the Mississippi River, not knowing the location of the Appalachian Mountains, not knowing the climatic variation between New Hampshire and Florida because they're vastly different and diverse. And to understand what happened, you need to understand them well. One of the great challenges of studying history under any circumstances is that such a lot to learn, which might appear to be secondary to the history itself, but really is integral to it.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about your experience as a hired grader of AP US History tests.

Patrick Allitt:

I used to do it back in the 1990s. I was a beginning professor in need of some extra money. And every early summer, large numbers of us would go to Trinity University in San Antonio. And they were high school teachers who'd actually been teaching the course, advanced graduate students and beginning professors. We sat in rooms of about eight people and graded either the document-based question or the free answer essay question all day long. It was interesting because it gave us a chance to see how students in large numbers had set about attempting to do it. I remember being very struck by the extremely common misconceptions. I think the teachers must have shared them because they'd diligently passed them onto the students who then regurgitated them on the test.

For example, the idea that it was the sinking of the Lusitania which brought the United States into World War I. Time after time I read that this is what happened. To which the answer is the sinking of the Lusitania took place in the Spring of 1915. The Americans entered the war in the Spring of 1917. So, two years' worth of something else must have happened in the meantime to explain this, that's an example of inadequate attention to the chronology. I also remember that occasionally there were various experiments where states required every graduating high school student to take AP US history with the result vast numbers of them were certain to fail because it was simply far too difficult for most seniors to be able to do it. So, the easiest exams were those you could read in two or three minutes because the students had written almost nothing because they knew almost nothing. AP is most worthwhile among the most gifted 20% of every high school class where they really can already do college level work as 11th and 12th graders. And with hard work, they can learn the material that they'd otherwise do during a college intro class.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of the multiple-choice questions on the AP US History exam?

Patrick Allitt:

One year I had the job of writing wrong answers for inclusion in the multiple choice. I must say it's a fascinating experience because, as you can imagine, the wrong answers have got to be absolutely wrong. And yet they've got to appear to be tempting to students who are seeking out the right answer from among the wrong ones. So, it's got to allude to the right answer while definitely being wrong. And we then went through an extremely rigorous process of making sure that there was no doubt that they really were wrong. But I do have a general gripe about multiple choice, which I'd like to seize the opportunity to pass onto you while I'm on air with you, Larry.

American students do too many multiple-choice tests and they don't write enough. The great weakness of multiple choice is that it teaches students to discriminate between fine shades of meaning, which is clearly a good thing, but it doesn't teach them how to express fine shades of meaning. They don't write enough. Unfortunately, nearly all-American students, including some of the most gifted ones who I meet in my classes, are inexperienced writers. Whereas they're very familiar with multiple choice and can do a great job with it. It certainly has its uses and I understand the temptation because they can be graded by machines. But I would favor a reform which got rid of multiple choice altogether and made the whole of the AP exam entirely written out by the students, even though it would require more individual graders.

Larry Bernstein:

To prepare for the AP US History test, students are forced to practice writing in-class essays.

Patrick Allitt:

I think it's a very good thing being able to write clearly and concisely and under time constraints. These are all things should be done because we live in a highly literate society, which rewards people who can express their ideas clearly and quickly in writing. I can't think of a better use of the student's time. They've got to learn to spend time writing rigorously and practice makes perfect. The more you do it, the more likely you are to be able to do it well the next time around or when the exam actually comes.

Larry Bernstein:

What are the benefits for your students at Emory who score a 4 or 5 on the AP US History exam?

Patrick Allitt:

It means that they're availed having to take an introductory history class, so it can fulfill one of the college's uniform requirements. And that means that when they start their college careers, they quite often already have quite a lot of accumulated credits. There are high schools which prepare their juniors and seniors so rigorously that they take eight or 10 or even 12 AP courses, and as they enter college, they're already at the sophomore level, which in turn means that with a bit of energy that can graduate in three years, which can save them thousands of dollars.

Larry Bernstein:

Are there adverse consequences for the AP students who pass out of an introductory history class?

Patrick Allitt:

No, I don't think they are, because unlike in classes like mathematics or physics, there's no esoteric knowledge involved in learning history.

Larry Bernstein:

I looked at various college course catalogs at Penn and Chicago and they do not offer introductory surveys in US History but Northern Illinois does. What is driving that?

Patrick Allitt:

I think it's a growing sense of discomfort in the elite institutions that there can be a master narrative because they're particularly anxious about the possibility that the voices of the oppressed will be submerged. Now, it's certainly true that there are many different ways you can set about telling the story. You can tell it from the top down, which is the old traditional way emphasizing political leadership like Washington during the revolution and Lincoln and Grant during the Civil War. And you can do it from the Howard Zinn point of view, *The People's History of the United States*, where you look first of all at the experience of the slaves and the experience of the indentured servants and the experience of the pioneering trade unionists and how they gradually carved out a way of life for themselves in the face of a hostile world.

But of course, in either case, you're missing part of the story. The textbooks have tried to finesse that by doing both. Having chapters about the New Deal but then they also study the experience of workers, particularly after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. Then there'll be a passage in the textbook about women's experience in the thirties. Then there'll be one about Native Americans in the thirties. Then there'll be one about each of these new groups, which has been clamoring for attention over the last half century, rightly so. I don't mean to denigrate that, but what it means, of course, is that the narrative tends to become shapeless and unwieldy. Some elite schools have thrown up their hands and said, we're no longer going to claim that a continuous narrative course is either possible or even desirable. But that has problems of its own because it leaves glaring gaps in the student's knowledge.

Larry Bernstein:

In my New Trier High School US History class taught by Steven Hilsabeck, he included a few chapters of Howard Zinn's book, which attacked the US political system and its leadership. Is that a good idea?

Patrick Allitt:

I'm in favor of it so long as it's done in moderation, and so long as it isn't allowed to crowd out all the other matters. One of the hazards of social history and labor history, although in general I support them strongly, is that they tend to overlook the degree to which the conduct of elites affects less privileged people. Obviously, Howard Zinn was a very entertaining writer and a very provocative one. It's good to remind the students that whatever narrative of history you come up with is itself a human artifact.

How do you think about your own nation? And it's very common, particularly among conservative critics of AP, to hear them saying AP is too critical of the nation. It doesn't do enough to encourage an attitude of reverence towards George Washington. It ought to be more patriotic.

Now, the nature of the historical profession to which obviously I belong, is that we're very suspicious about anything which makes people celebrate, because that tends to make us think inducing an emotional state in students is actually highly disadvantageous to accurate study. It ought to mean that we're also very careful not to turn any group into heroes of history. That what we're trying to do is to look at the complexity of the interplay of different groups of people while maintaining an objective distance.

Larry Bernstein:

I remember Howard Zinn describing Columbus as a genocidal-like figure while the textbook portrayed him as an entrepreneurial risk taker seeking new trade routes.

Patrick Allitt:

I would say that to accuse Columbus of genocide is highly misleading. Because to be genocidal, you have to be like Hitler or Pol Pot, whose intention is to kill entire categories of the population. On the other hand, it's true that Columbus's arrival and the conquistadors with the horrible pathogens they brought with them, really did have exterminating consequences for the Native Americans, even though those were consequences that the Spaniards had not foreseen. But I do think that the intention is a very important distinction. It's certainly necessary for students to understand just how ghastly the consequences of Europeans arrival was for Native Americans. I think it's inescapable that Columbus has to be seen as a very paradoxical kind of hero, even if his intentions weren't villainous.

Larry Bernstein:

The AP US History exam includes an essay question that requires the analysis of a number of historical documents that are provided. What do you think of this DBQ essay requirement?

Patrick Allitt:

I like it very much. I think the document-based question is one of the very best things. Certainly, grading them, it was easier to work out who were the very best students, because a good student would already have quite a lot of knowledge of the era and would be able to use that as a framework and then get additional information out of the documents to enrich the answer that they gave. And the examiners are careful to provide different kinds of documents. There'll often be a map, a picture or a cartoon, sometimes the lyrics of a song that was written later. And good students are adept at showing how all these things can be brought together. The DBQ is the apogee of AP.

Larry Bernstein:

I took the US History AP Test 40 years ago. At the time as a 16-year-old, I was hugely impressed by the exam. I thought it was the most thorough and finest test that I had ever taken. As a professional historian, what do you think of it?

Patrick Allitt:

I think it's very high. I've seen a little bit behind the scenes, so I know the care that's put into the phrasing of every single bit of it. That the multiple-choice questions, even though I do not like them in general, I admit that they're excellent questions of their kind. The DBQs are excellent and they give the students the right amount of choice and compulsion. So, no student can get away with only concentrating on the 20th century. They have to choose one of three big essay questions and demonstrate their facility with that.

Larry Bernstein:

In my junior high and high school history survey classes, we always seemed to run out of time and then miss the last 25 years, is that common.

Patrick Allitt:

Because I knew we were going to have this conversation today, Larry, I looked up the apportionment of questions and grades, because I remember that history's divided into nine sections. The first two sections are 1491 to 1607. So that's Columbus and Spanish and Portuguese America up to the time of Jamestown. The second one is 1607 to 1754. So that's the period from the first English colonist to the French and Indian War. But each of those is only worth 4% to 6%. And then each of the subsequent passages is worth 10 to 17% until you get to 1980. And the 1980 and since falls back to this 4% to 6% scoring.

The examiners are facing up to the fact that teachers simply run out of energy. They meant to teach about Reagan and the end of the Cold War and globalization and everything that's happened since. But they just didn't have time for it.

Larry Bernstein:

What don't you like about the AP test?

Patrick Allitt:

I don't like the fact that the reality of the yearlong course tends to be an exhausting cram. Once you've set off on this journey, you simply have to keep going, piling up more and more information. It's probably necessary, but it's a little bit indigestible. It feels like being sat down every night to eat more food than you really want. And much of it from a student's point of view is hard to love. But on the other hand, I suppose that's true of every discipline. The fun really

comes much later when you're so familiar with the narrative that then you can argue about it in an intelligent way.

Similarly, the well-meaning examiners at AP have recently put more emphasis on controversy and argument among interpreters. They've tried to say, we want to make it less just a matter of learning masses of stuff and then regurgitating it on the exam. But you can't really argue about it until you know what happened. And to be able to argue about the controversies which surround slavery, or the Industrial revolution, or whether America should get involved in World War II, means that you need to know even more. You need to know the differing points of view of combatants at the time.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's imagine that you are homeschooling your child and Patrick Allitt is not available, but the virtual Patrick Allitt is.

You taught a US History survey class that is available at the Great Courses. And the parents say listen kid, I'm going to work. Watch a few episodes of Patrick's class and then we'll talk about it when I get home. Get going. Now, your online class is 42 hours long as compared to 180 hours for a high school course.

Your class is both entertaining and exhaustive. I suspect a bright child could get a 5 on the AP test if the student read the textbook and engaged with the material.

Patrick Allitt:

Yes. If you could retain it. There's an entire industry surrounding helping your kids get a five on AP US history. There are lots of very good video resources, study guides, and lots of ways of gaming the test. I support very strongly every student watching the Teaching Company lectures in which I was a participant. I think they're a terrific series, and we work very hard to be as comprehensive as possible.

There's an absolute linear relationship between reading a lot and doing well on the exams. Even though hundreds of people have looked for shortcuts, there simply hasn't ever been one. You've just got to spend the time learning it.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go back to the issue of understanding important dates in history. A standard textbook is filled with dates. There has been 250 years since the Declaration of Independence, but Patrick if I asked you for a list of your top 20-list of dates, I think that would get you 90% there.



Patrick Allitt:

Exactly. That's right because real historians write the exam. We're still organized history around periods of time and crucial turning points. And no amount of revisionism can really change that.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next speaker Annie Abrams says in her book that she is worried that there are big differences from the AP class and a college class and that a passing score on the AP does not show mastery of the material.

Patrick Allitt:

I would hesitate to give college credit anywhere to a three because you've got to have a fairly poor grasp of the issues to score a three. But I do think that a four and a five is defensible in any college classroom in America. Perhaps the most stringent colleges might think about making it five only. I'm content with the imperfections of the test and the presuppositions.

Larry Bernstein:

Annie is also concerned about the profit motive driving the College Board.

Patrick Allitt:

The college board is a nonprofit. So presumably they've got some fairly strict rules that they have to follow to prevent themselves from making too much money. They want to be solvent and they certainly want to be prestigious. I think their principal concern is to make sure that their exams continue to be held in high repute. And I would also say that the colleges are probably more vulnerable to the accusation of profiteering than the College Board is. If you look at the incredible escalation of college tuition prices in recent decades, it's hard not to feel that in some cases it's seizing on an opportunity to charge more than the education is worth.

Larry Bernstein:

It costs \$15,000 to take a yearlong survey class in an elite college and only \$150 to take an AP test.

Patrick Allitt:

<laugh>. Exactly. That's a very good way of putting it because a conscientious student will learn about the same in each one of them.

Larry Bernstein:

There are a number of new AP History classes such as Geography and World History, what do you think about that?

Patrick Allitt:

One of the great differences between my educational experience as a kid growing up in England and students here is that we did study geography formally as an academic subject and it was absolutely integral into the British curriculum. I was surprised when I came here to find that kids don't study geography. The result is that they're pitifully ignorant of what the world looks like and they ought not to be. Maps are so central. If I was America's Secretary of Education, the first thing I'd do is establish compulsory geography classes for everyone. I'm a bit doubtful about world history because it's such a massive topic. As I said to you, I think US history is almost too big to manage.

World history is definitely too big to manage. And so that's got to become impressionistic. On the other hand, it does have the valuable consequence of de-centering the United States and of prompting American students, most of whom have never been to any other country to remember their country is simply one of many.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you minimize ideological controversy in teaching US history and in the US History AP exam?

Patrick Allitt:

I think it's nicely in the background, presumably when they get to issues like the development of the modern feminist movement and Roe v Wade, teachers are going to have to tread carefully. My own method of doing it would be to express no opinion and merely to draw the students' attention to the fact that opinions were sharply divided and that they remain divided thereafter. But then I would say to the students, remember that our job as historians is not to take sides, but rather to say, here's a controversy. Here's a set of events, here's why they were controversial, and here is how the controversy played out. And that's as far as we should take it in our work as historians, whatever we might think as citizens.

Patrick Allitt:

One of the things that students have got to do if they're going to really understand history is to face up to the fact that highly intelligent people have held ideas which are in direct contradiction to each other at the same time. And that what we've got to do as historians is try to understand what those ideas were and why they held them. I always think one good example is the isolationists before World War II. We tend to either forget about them all together or to look at them as backward and deluded because they wanted not to fight Hitler. And now there's obviously a huge consensus that fighting Hitler was the right thing to do. It's a tough job to get the students to read what they said and take seriously the moral intensity of their belief that to participate in a European war is wrong.

But we ought to do that because otherwise we can't really understand what President Roosevelt was up against during that long period from September '39 to December '41 when he might have wanted to participate in the war against Hitler, but was precluded from doing so because of how unpopular it would be among the electorate.

Or what about the loyalists during the American Revolution? Now, 99 out of every hundred books written in America about the American Revolution are written from the revolutionary point of view with the assumption that they were right. I mean, if ever there was an excluded group, they were the loyalists, poor things <laugh>.

If we're serious about history, we've got to be rigorous in our analysis of the ideas which were discredited. There's this fantastic passage in *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mills where he says, if you think you've got a belief, you don't know if you really believe it until you've learned the very best arguments against it. And until you are certain that you can refute them when you're arguing against someone who really believes those ideas. It's a high standard. And I think that's one of the things we need to do as historians.

Larry Bernstein:

Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go. Jesse Jackson said this at a protest in opposition to the Stanford curriculum. What do you make of it?

Patrick Allitt:

I'm against it because I'm a defender of Western civilization. The great thing about Western civilization is that it's extremely good at self-criticism. And so, although it's certainly responsible for plenty of atrocities, it's also responsible for condemning those atrocities and for remedying them. If we look at the history of slavery, we have to look at it, side by side with the fact that this is the civilization which decided to abolish slavery and subsequently did everything it could to stamp out slavery elsewhere. It's a civilization, which has had incredible achievements in the development of science and technology, vastly improving the lives of nearly everybody, even the lives of people who showed no interest in developing it at the time. So Western civilization, for all its imperfections, is an extremely good thing that needs to be defended.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about AP testing and US history pedagogy?

Patrick Allitt:

I'm optimistic that AP will survive because despite all its imperfections, I still think it's a very good thing. Students who've gone through this rigorous process and studied hard and succeeded on the exam have been enormously helped by it. And that it's given them at least an introductory

picture of the whole of American history on which they can then build in each subsequent part of their historical education.

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Annie Abrams:

Every year, millions of American high school students cram for AP exams. Those exams are supposed to represent a college level education in one of 39 subjects. But those classes, for all the college tuition relief they provide, are not the best possible substitute for college. The educators who developed the AP program during the Cold War didn't intend for it to be this way, and it's also not what I expected when I started teaching. Once I had my doctorate, I became an AP English teacher, and I was surprised to learn that this involved drilling students on 40-minute essays and decoding formulaic multiple-choice questions. I think that English class should give students the opportunity to think through multifaceted social problems. I think that students should learn to express themselves through writing and revision, and they should learn to see themselves as participants in a public conversation.

There are real stakes for what goes on in an English class. Instructors in high school and in college should be empowered to design thoughtful courses. The College Board's emphasis on time-standardized testing contradicts the deep engagement and collaborative inquiry that defines the best classroom experience. In some states, AP teachers receive bonuses based on how many of their students receive a passing score of three or higher. Students can game AP exams with test prep programs. And there's a lot of incentive to do this because with high enough AP scores, college tuition can be reduced. And then for institutions, AP exam scores are sometimes tied to rankings and to bonuses. All of this sends the message to everybody involved that the point of education is high test scores.

But when humanities courses become this robotic game, we risk deep cynicism. The first part of the book is about AP's Cold War origins. The current scene is really not what they imagined. One of the architects was James Bryant Conant. He championed using standardized exams to facilitate social mobility. He hoped that a liberal arts education would emphasize honest discussion and challenge students' apathy, and that this would be good preparation for democratic citizenship. In 1948, he wrote, "the school itself is a society exemplifying the ideas we extol." But the educators whose philosophies initially justified the program seeded administrative control to the College Board. And right out the gate, AP's emphasis on standardized exams started to grow.

By 1967, Frank Bowles, who was president of the organization, wrote "the tendency of the Board as an organization is to subordinate the humane to the technical." So, whether it was the right body to facilitate liberal arts humanities courses was a question from the start. Under its

current CEO, David Coleman, a former management consultant, the College Board has grown into a college credit selling powerhouse. The organization held nearly \$1.7 billion in net assets. And that sounds like a lot of money. And much of the money comes from selling tests like AP exams or the SAT. The company also sells student data. Last year, the company sold nearly 5 million AP exams, and each cost between \$97 and \$145. Families pay test fees. And if they can't afford them, federal and state funding subsidizes the cost. State legislatures have enshrined the College Board's power by pressing public universities to grant credit for passing scores. So, when the College Board functions as a private middleman that's taking a chunk out of public education.

The College Board often defends the program's growth in terms of expanding equity. When public school students have access to AP's coursework, it might help them think that they're on track for a college degree. Many students do benefit from tuition reduction. But as the College Board's presence in public schools has expanded, many prestigious private schools have abandoned the system. Teachers from Lawrenceville, Andover, and Exeter helped design AP and they gave the brand its reputation, but the schools no longer offer Humanities AP and colleges including Harvard, Dartmouth, Brown, Stanford are skeptical specifically of Humanities AP courses. AP has become a way to replicate, automate, and streamline a very narrow form of meritocracy, all for the sake of profit. The program's vast public influence worries me because the College Board's pursuit of economic growth makes it susceptible to political pressure.

Earlier this year, it was accused of removing lessons from its AP African-American studies curriculum that angered Ron DeSantis, presumably to keep the course available in the state. And after months of outcry from scholars, the College Board announced that it would revise the course to ensure that students would get “the most holistic possible introduction to African-American studies.” But I think that no matter the outcome of that revision, the College Board's original caginess about yielding to political pressure is anathema to the culture of inquiry and conversation at the core of a liberal arts education. College syllabi are not dictated from on high. Implementation of the College Board's prescriptions vary from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. But I think that the current AP model undermines both the concept of public school as a democratic institution, as a site where people can engage and of college as a space dedicated to serious intellectual growth. Students, parents, teachers and administrators really do look to the College Board for solutions to problems across secondary and college education. But the financial and educational costs of standardized testing demand scrutiny of a system that supports a billion-dollar company's interests over the students it's meant to serve.

Larry Bernstein:

What makes a successful AP English class?

Annie Abrams:

The teacher. I think that I taught a good AP course. I collaborated with a colleague on an interdisciplinary American studies course. So, my section of it was a chronological survey of American literature.

Larry Bernstein:

How does high school AP English class compare with a college introductory English class?

Annie Abrams:

An AP English course in a public high school is not the same thing as the very best version of a college English course. I know that history doesn't look the same. I know that political science is different. What is the substance of those exams? What do those exam scores represent?

Larry Bernstein:

The AP English exams requires an in-class essay. To prepare, AP students are drilled in writing essays. There is a grading methodology that encourages kids to write their essays in a way that gets the highest grade, do you find that problematic?

Annie Abrams:

I don't know that the AP model leads to cogent thinking. When you have rubrics and templates that replace discernment, you risk turning essay writing into a game of Mad Libs. So, it might look like a student can produce a coherent essay, but it's like a house of cards. For me, there's not a sharp line between practicing writing and doing it. So, if you value students writing in-class essays, that's great. Why does it have to be this sort of pretend exercise instead of the thing itself? Why not write a full -length thing that you revise, that you have office hours meeting about that really means something to you?

Larry Bernstein:

In the 1960s, AP tests were designed to allow students at America's best prep schools to take more advanced classes in college as freshman or skip a year. Today these prep schools have abandoned AP testing, what has caused that? Is it that now that a million kids are taking the AP tests that they have become too pedestrian for Andover?

Annie Abrams:

They didn't say it's because it became so pedestrian, but what they said is that it's not aligned with their educational philosophy. They'd rather have teachers who design custom courses.

Larry Bernstein:

Andover is a spectacular high school and some Ivies are no longer giving much credence to AP tests. But maybe we should look at how these exams are used by the typical college and the

median college student and see if they are useful in teaching and pedagogy? There is big difference between Northern Illinois and Penn.

Annie Abrams:

It comes down to the definition of college that you have in mind. Another way to think about it is having an expert in the classroom who has a degree of academic freedom to model intellectual habits for students. And those things are not incompatible. That's the difference between what you were saying about Northern Illinois's acceptance of AP and what's going on at Penn. It's all based on research. And that freedom of inquiry is a really important habit. And one of my concerns is diminished space for other approaches.

Larry Bernstein:

The movie *Stand and Deliver* tells the true story of James Escalante who teaches immigrant kids in LA to pass the Calculus AP test. The administration says it cannot be done, and against all odds the minority students learn the material and pass the test. The achievement is not inflated grades from an unknown high school but real quantifiable performance. It shocks the College Board who think it must be fraud and the kids have to retake the tests.

Standards matter. Success and verifiable achievement are powerful.

Annie Abrams:

How do you demonstrate a level of excellence and what's the point? Those are really important questions. And I wish that more academics were weighing in about AP because the current point of AP is to replace college level courses. So, demonstrating excellence in high school, is that the same thing as earning a college credit? I'm unconvinced.

Larry Bernstein:

One problem with senior year in high school is senioritis. Kids check out during the second semester because it does not influence where they get admitted to college. But the AP test preparation requires academic diligence in that second semester. I remember being all-in for my five AP classes.

Annie Abrams:

In English in particular, many of the students who sign up for AP Lit senior year have already taken AP Lang Junior year, and most universities only accept one or the other. So that incentive that you're talking about.

Larry Bernstein:

You teach at Bronx Science which is one of the top magnet schools in New York City and many of your students are geniuses. I am much more concerned about motivating the median college

student than the top .1%. Changing topics do you think it is a good idea to pay teachers bonuses depending on the number of students getting passing scores on AP tests?

Annie Abrams:

I understand the arguments. I'm glad that I wasn't in a system like that. I think that there are students who work really hard and do everything within their power to improve as readers and writers, I'm talking specifically about English, and who wind up with ones or twos. And I don't think that their teachers should hold that against them. It's really important to have great teachers. Do those bonuses turn teachers who would not otherwise care into great teachers? I don't know.

I think also in schools where there are AP and non-AP offerings, I think automatically prioritizing teachers who teach AP, it's a strange dynamic to navigate.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you teach in your AP English class at Bronx Science that gets lost on the AP exam?

Annie Abrams:

For me to teach students that Ralph Ellison really cared a lot about Emerson, Henry James, and Frederick Douglass. That's a form of knowledge that's worth knowing about for its own sake. Even if it doesn't show up on the AP exam at the end of the course, it can be hard to convey that. It's a weird competition between what the class is about. Is it about preparing for this test, or is it about learning? And I don't think that those are necessarily incompatible goals, but it's a little uneasy.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is preparing for the AP test potentially incompatible with learning?

Annie Abrams:

Because when every incentive is towards the test, something like caring about the passive voice, or caring about Ellison's vision for the American canon and why it mattered to him, teaching about those things is at best secondary.

Larry Bernstein:

Annie, what are you optimistic about?

Annie Abrams:

The AP program effects so many students and so many teachers and administrators, and there should just be a lot more conversation. Agreement is not my goal. I'm happy when people form different views. As long as this thing doesn't go completely unchallenged. I think that's great.



Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Patrick and Annie for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was Education Freedom and School Choice.

Our first speaker was Betsy DeVos, the former Secretary of Education and the author of the book *Hostages No More: The Fight for Education Freedom and the Future of the American Child*. Betsy spoke about why school choice improves educational outcomes. She also discussed how COVID changed the relationship between parents and schools, and how some students might benefit from vocational training instead of a college track curriculum.

Our second speaker was my buddy Darren Schwartz who is the *What Happens Next* movie critic. We discussed three films. The documentary *Waiting for Superman* which is about the success of charter schools. We then reviewed two classic films on teenage angst: the ridiculous and stupid comedy classic *Superbad* and the romantic comedy *Easy A*.

I now want to make a plug for next week's show that will be about the US Supreme Court decisions decided this term. The session will include Renee Flaherty who is the attorney who successfully argued the case of *Jackson v. Raffensperger*. This is a case about the limits of state authority to regulate professions. Jackson teaches breastfeeding management and the state demands that she achieve certain minimum education requirements that would prevent her from doing her chosen profession which is counseling lactation care.

Renee is an attorney with the Institute for Justice, a not-for-profit that challenges government overreach on licensing and regulation as well as infringement on individual property rights.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.