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For AP Students, a New Classroom Is Online

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



When budget cuts wiped out honors French classes at her Uxbridge, Mass., high school, 18-year-old Katie Larrivee turned to the Internet.

These days, Ms. Larrivee, who plans to study abroad in college, practices her pronunciation alone in front of a computer.

"J'ai renforcé ma compréhension de la langue" by taking an advanced-placement French course online, Ms. Larrivee says.

Advanced-placement classes have been booming amid efforts by high-school students and parents to trim college tuition costs and gain an edge in the college-admissions race. A record 1.99 million high-school students are expected to take AP exams next month, up 159% from 2000, says Trevor Packer, vice president, advanced placement, for the College Board, New York, the nonprofit that oversees AP courses and testing. About 90% of U.S. colleges and universities award college credit to high-school students who pass the program's rigorous subject-matter tests.



Benjamin Sklar for The Wall Street Journal

Dixie Ross, right, helps student Alexandra Cubaleski, 18, prepare for an AP calculus exam at Pflugerville High School in Pflugerville, Texas.

The courses, however, can be expensive for schools to offer because they are often smaller than average, making it hard to justify keeping them amid teacher layoffs and cutbacks in sports and arts programs that serve more students. Some schools also pay the \$87 fee for a student to take an AP exam, and scholarships are often available for kids who can't afford the fees.

For students in districts facing budget cuts, online courses are becoming an increasingly popular option. Courses require students to log on, and teachers are available by email, phone, online discussions or instant messaging. After completing the course, students take the AP exam in school like other students.

Online courses permit students to click on a current lesson, read materials, complete exercises or quizzes, and file assignments or exams online. Online whiteboards enable teachers to sketch lecture notes or show solutions to problems. Students practice skills and problems through interactive quizzes or games, and complete group

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projects on collaborative websites.

While only about 0.5% of AP classes are currently taken online, virtual courses are becoming available through online schools in 27 states, state programs that allow students to sign up for individual online courses in 32 states, or charter schools. Students also can enroll directly in online AP classes for a fee through private companies that offer them directly; Advanced Academics, Oklahoma City, charges \$425 for a one-semester AP class. Apex Learning, Seattle; Aventa Learning and its parent company K12 Inc., Herndon, Va.; or the Florida Virtual School, Orlando, Fla., also offer online AP courses.



Benjamin Sklar for the Wall Street Journal

Pflugerville High School is keeping its AP classes despite budget cuts.

Kirby Kirkpatrick, a father from Plainfield, Ind., signed up his two daughters for online AP classes through a charter school because it offered both traditional classes and a wider variety of AP classes, both in class and online, than their small public high school. The charter school has students attend classes on campus for two days a week and take online courses three days a week. His daughter Kayla, 17, will be taking several AP exams next month and hopes to enter college with as many as 24 college credits, saving the family several thousand dollars in tuition. His daughter Kori, 15, also takes AP courses online.

"They get as much school work done in 3½ hours as it takes eight to do" in a traditional school day, Mr. Kirkpatrick says. Kayla

Kirkpatrick says she likes moving through the material at her own pace, in contrast with a traditional classroom where "sometimes I'm really bored, and other times it is moving way too fast for me."

One potential drawback for socially connected teens: taking an advanced placement course online seems to require advanced placement time-management skills. Being online with access to Facebook or Twitter, can be "a bit of a distraction," Kayla Kirkpatrick says.

To stay on track, she logs the assignments she must finish by the end of each day and highlights those that are completed. "I tell myself that when I get through X number of things, I can allow myself 10 minutes on Facebook," she says.

Ms. Larrivee, the student who is taking AP French, says splicing her online studies into the late-night or early-morning hours enables her to squeeze in more activities, including cheerleading, a communications internship and volunteering at a special-needs camp.

When taking her online course, Ms. Larrivee sometimes gets frustrated by the lack of a teacher and classmates nearby. She is graded on recordings of her French pronunciation exercises, but "I don't have someone I can physically have a conversation with about whether I'm pronouncing words well or using grammar the way I should," she says.

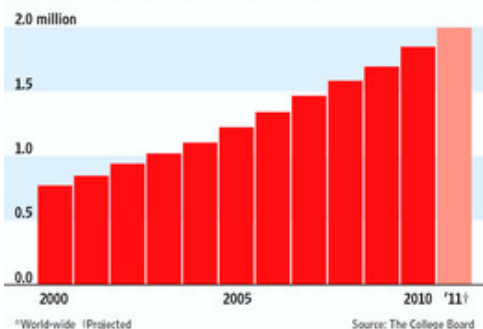
While some teachers reply quickly to emails and instant messages, others take a day or longer to respond.

The requirement for students to do lab experiments in science, particularly in chemistry, is another obstacle to online AP study. While physics and biology lab exercises and reports can sometimes be done at home using lab kits and supplies purchased for about \$175 to \$250, most online chemistry students have to travel to a supervised lab to do experiments involving volatile chemicals.

The College Board says there isn't any significant difference in average test scores between students from traditional versus online classrooms. No rigorous, peer-reviewed studies have been done using control groups to compare large samples of online AP students with those in traditional classroom. Smaller studies suggest students taking online

Ramping Up

Number of high school students taking advanced placement exams*



classes achieve at about the same or higher levels than those in the classroom.

Officials are predicting cutbacks in AP classes in Michigan, where funding next year may fall 10%. Some school districts in upstate New York are considering eliminating almost all AP courses. Budget problems in some Ohio and Maryland schools have sparked talk of AP cutbacks.

In Pflugerville, Texas, a suburb of Austin, schools will continue to offer AP classes despite an expected 15% cut in state school funding, because they are so popular, a spokeswoman says. Alexandra

Cubaleski, 18, a Pflugerville high-school senior who has taken 10 AP

classes, says that in addition to earning college credit, "being in an AP class puts you a level above everybody else." She plans to attend New York University in the fall.

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