EMPOWERLY



2026

The Course Premium Report

How did enrollment in 36 AP courses impact admissions outcomes of 11,764 students at 524 universities?

Austin Gorman, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

- **Empowerly analyzed 11,764 of its own students across 524 universities** to discover which of the 36 AP courses reliably correlate with an admissions advantage, comparing takers to non-takers while adjusting for GPA. We found more than one in four AP exams taken in 2025 came from a course where our analysis showed no measurable admissions boost.

- **Six AP courses reliably help,** each with a tight statistical range: Calculus BC (+5.18%), Psychology (+4.64%), Biology (+4.58%), Chemistry (+4.51%), English Language (+4.04%), and Statistics (+3.23%). Four of the six are quantitative or lab sciences, and together they fill two math slots, two sciences, a social science, and an English course.

- **Seven more courses point in a positive direction but can't be sized precisely** because their credible intervals are too wide.

- **Six AP courses show no measurable admissions advantage,** even with tight ranges: Calculus AB, Computer Science A, World History, Computer Science Principles, Physics 1 and U.S. History.

- **Some courses are non-negotiable at selective schools.** Many selective schools expect four years of math and English, so course choice pays dividends only in flexible slots. If a school doesn't offer Calculus BC, AB might be a student's sole option to satisfy the AP Calculus "requirement." Additionally, admissions officers measure course rigor against the classes available at a student's high school, not a universal list of all AP courses.

- **Beyond the recommended AP courses, the schedule should serve an intended major.** The report maps courses with an admissions lift onto five fields (STEM, Healthcare, Business, Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities). STEM applicants have five courses that are both core to their field and high-lift, while Business majors get only two and should load up on "useful" high-lift courses. For undecided students, English Language, Biology, Psychology, and Statistics appear in every column and reliably help.

A few limits on the report. The findings are correlational, not causal: they describe how admissions outcomes differ between students who took a given AP course and those who didn't.

The data come entirely from Empowerly's own clients (11,764 students across 524 universities) and rely on self-reported, differently weighted GPAs, so they may not generalize to other applicants or to any particular school.

This summary is provided for information only and is not admissions, academic, or professional advice.

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Foreword: The Course Premium Report

Choosing whether, and how many, AP courses to take is one of the highest-stakes decisions students make.

Every spring, students sit down with a course request form and try to guess what an admissions reader will think years later. They add an AP because they think it will help earn a spot at their first-choice college, or drop one to avoid burnout. But no one can say for sure whether either choice made a difference.

There's also a timing problem families rarely think about. A student applying senior year submits their course schedule to colleges months before they'd be able to sit for a single exam. What an admissions reader sees is the course on the transcript, not the score. Participation is the signal; the result arrives after the decision.

After spending more than a decade in college admissions, most recently as part of the admissions team at UC Berkeley, and reading thousands of applications, I can tell you that rigor matters. Selective schools especially want students to choose the most rigorous courses their schools offer.

But is there such a thing as too many AP courses? At what point does adding another course add little, while costing a student sleep or a line on their activities list that says more to admissions readers? Does AP Computer Science A carry the same weight as AP Psychology? And does a schedule with more eclectic APs read differently than core courses?

This report is a step toward better answers, not the last word. Our analysis is far from exhaustive. The data have limits, course offerings differ from one high school to the next, and admissions officers aren't robots — they read AP courses with their own unique perspectives.

Nothing here should be read as definitive, and no family should use it to push students toward a schedule that doesn't fit. A counselor who knows the whole student will always have better answers than a report.

This report *is* a conversation starter for parents trying to make a good decision with little information. Among counselors who field the same questions every spring and those of us who've sat in committee rooms, we know how much remains opaque. If the pages that follow raise more questions than they answer, they'll have done their job.



Brennan Bowen,
Empowerly Lead Counselor and Former Admissions Reader at UC Berkeley and Stanford

When it comes to college admissions, which AP courses matter most?

Families know that AP courses matter in college admissions. Nobody tells them some may matter more than others.

Colleges don't publish lists of the AP classes they reward, so anecdotes fill in the gap: a high school guidance counselor's gut feeling, what worked for a friend's kid, a Facebook thread with admissions advice.

Sometimes families pick correctly. Other times a student is limited by what their high school offers, and doesn't need to choose. And for students targeting less selective colleges, maximizing every AP course isn't always necessary.

But for students with multiple AP course options to fill a single slot, or who are questioning whether a heavier course load is worthwhile, knowing which AP courses correlate with an admissions advantage helps.

This report gives students and families the numbers to choose courses most likely to matter, and avoid those that unnecessarily strain a student while buying little in return.

> **More than one in four AP exams in 2025 came from a course that showed no measurable admissions advantage in our analysis.[1]**

About Empowerly

Since 2017, Empowerly has counseled thousands of students, helping them secure admission to top schools. We pair students with former admissions officers, many of whom spent years evaluating applications at the same selective schools our students apply to. Their perspectives on how admissions committees read transcripts appear throughout this report.

Empowerly combines one-on-one counseling with original research drawn from our own students' admissions outcomes, which is where the data in this report comes from.

About the Analysis

This report uses data from 11,764 Empowerly students and their admissions outcomes at 524 universities. The model compares students who took a particular AP course with students who didn't, adjusting for GPA, across 36 courses.[2]

Every figure here is an association. Students who take AP Chemistry differ from students who don't in ways no model can fully capture: from their choice of major to the high schools they attend. Better admissions odds may reflect a course's advantage, the type of student who took it, or both.

High school course availability also shapes results. AP classes associated with an admissions advantage are sometimes less common; schools that offer more AP courses are a confounding factor because a student's choice partly depends on what their school offers.

This analysis also assumes two students with a 4.0 GPA. At a lower GPA, the admissions boost may be smaller, and because these are averages across 524 universities, the advantage may be higher or lower at a particular school.

Finally, intended major changes both course choices and admissions, and our model doesn't capture it. That's the most likely explanation for AP Physics 2's negative estimate of -14.61%, which we don't read as harming applicants. The same reasoning might apply to positive estimates for AP Physics C and AP Calculus BC, which draw from the same applicant pool.

Where each course fell

We asked two questions about every AP course. Does it help a student's chances? And how sure can we be about the answer?

Every course has an estimated admissions impact (e.g., a +10.0% advantage measured at our 65% baseline increases the chance of admission to 71.5%, or by 6.5 percentage points). It also includes a range of values the model considers plausible. Additionally, a course's effect is considered reliable, by our definition, when the range of values spans less than 5.5 points.

A narrow range means we can estimate a course's admissions effect reliably. A wide one means we can see which way it points. In this data, the courses with narrow ranges are the ones thousands of students took.[3]

Our two questions sort 36 AP courses into four groups.

Six reliably help

Every value in the range we report is positive, and the range is narrow enough.

Seven look like they help

The effect is positive, but the range is too wide to say how large the admissions boost is.

Six show no advantage we can measure

The ranges are narrow, but each extends below zero, so the data can't confirm an advantage for any of them. No estimate reaches half the size of the largest confirmed lift.

Fourteen are too uncertain to call

Their ranges stay too wide to settle on a number.

Three more courses point downward on ranges too wide to size, and we report them separately: AP French, AP Physics 2, and AP Spanish Literature. Two courses, AP African American Studies and AP Italian, had too few students to model at all. We don't read these as evidence the courses harm applicants.

Does a course help, and how sure are we?

	More reliable interval of 5.5 percentage points of relative effect or less			Less reliable interval of 5.5 percentage points of relative effect or greater		
Helps	**SIX SEEM TO HELP RELIABLY**		**6**	**LOOKS LIKE IT HELPS**		**7**
	Calculus BC	**+5.18%**	(3,662)	Comparative Government	**+32.70%**	(85)
	Psychology	**+4.64%**	(2,326)	Latin	**+22.07%**	(34)
	Biology	**+4.58%**	(3,120)	Music Theory	**+11.80%**	(236)
	Chemistry	**+4.51%**	(2,594)	Precalculus	**+9.06%**	(329)
	English Language	**+4.04%**	(5,973)	Physics C: Mechanics	**+7.31%**	(825)
	Statistics	**+3.23%**	(2,103)	Physics C: E&M	**+5.91%**	(365)
				European History	**+3.60%**	(1,247)
No clear help	**SIX DON'T SEEM TO HELP**		**6**	**TOO UNCERTAIN TO CALL**		**14**
	U.S. History	**+2.13%**	(5,776)	Art History		(151)
	Physics 1	**+0.79%**	(2,578)	Art and Design		(139)
	CS Principles	**-0.29%**	(2,728)	Chinese		(365)
	Calculus AB	**-1.26%**	(3,977)	English Literature		(935)
	World History	**-1.57%**	(4,367)	Environmental Science		(1,353)
	Computer Science A	**-1.89%**	(3,297)	German		(12)
				Human Geography		(1,690)
				Japanese		(42)
				Macroeconomics		(1,144)
				Microeconomics		(979)
				Research		(232)
				Seminar		(1,036)
				Spanish Language		(1,246)
				U.S. Government		(1,021)

Estimates that point down: French (362 students), Physics 2 (355 students), Spanish Literature (42 students).
Too few students to model at all: African American Studies, Italian.
Figures on the right are the total number of students.

The grid above offers a simple way to understand the impact and reliability of an AP course's admissions boost. A course counts as helping when every value in its range is positive. That line is ours, not the data's, and courses near it differ from each other less than the grouping suggests.

For example, AP Statistics, the weakest of the six helpful courses, has a range starting at +0.57%. AP U.S. History, the strongest in the doesn't-help category, has a range from -0.11% to +4.33%. The two sit in different quadrants, but are closer to one another than our grid indicates.

Course breakdown

The strongest six

Six courses show an advantage with a narrow range, suggesting they reliably correlate with an admissions boost. These include: Calculus BC at +5.18%, Psychology at +4.64%, Biology at +4.58%, Chemistry at +4.51%, English Language at +4.04%, and Statistics at +3.23%.

Four of the six are quantitative or lab sciences. Together they fill two math slots, two sciences, a social science, and an English course. None of these is an unusual choice.

Seven courses point up, but we can't size them precisely

Seven more courses show a positive advantage, and their ranges don't cross zero. But they're wider than the six above, and we can't confirm the size of their advantage.

Comparative Government (+32.70%) and Latin (+22.07%) have the largest admissions advantage in our model, but only 85 and 34 students took them, leaving us with ranges too wide to size accurately. Music Theory (+11.80%, 236 students) and Precalculus (+9.06%, 329 students) have the same problem.

The two Physics C courses rest on larger samples: Mechanics at +7.31% with 825 students and E&M at +5.91% with 365. Both estimates exceed the admissions advantage of every course in the strongest six, and their ranges are narrower than the four above, though still too wide to confirm.

European History came closest. Its +3.60% estimate draws on 1,247 students, more than both Physics C courses combined, and its range was only a half point too wide.

Courses that show no measurable advantage

AP World History, AP Calculus AB, AP Computer Science A, AP Computer Science Principles, AP Physics 1, and AP U.S. History (discussed below) each had more than 2,000 students in the model and tight ranges.[4] If they carried the same admissions lift as our confirmed courses,

the data would have shown it.

For World History, Calculus AB, and Computer Science A, the model makes any advantage above +0.66% at the upper bound unlikely. Computer Science Principles and Physics 1 allow for a modest lift, but nothing approaching our strongest six.

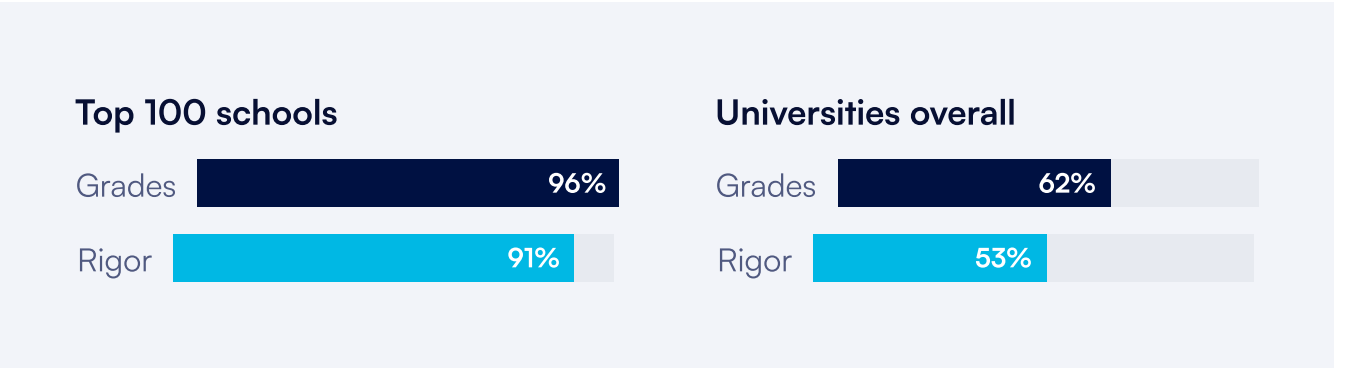
In some cases, what you don't take may send a signal as well

AP U.S. History's estimate is +2.13%, about 1.4 percentage points at a 65% baseline, with a range from -0.11% to +4.33%. The direction is likely positive, though how much it helps is less clear. The data are equally consistent with a lift above 2% and one below it, and because the range dips below zero, it sits with the courses showing no measurable advantage.

U.S. History is also the second most-taken AP exam in the country and the second-largest in our dataset. Former Brown admissions officer Daniel Mark puts U.S. History in the category of courses top schools expect to see. If a course is expected, its absence may count against a student while its presence earns little. In other words, it may offer a positive admissions lift too small to confirm. Our model compares students who took a course against those who didn't, so it can't separate a penalty for skipping a course from a reward for taking it.

Using the data

When it comes to admissions, course rigor (whether students opted for the hardest classes available) and grades (how well they did in those classes) are the two most important factors. In the Common Data Set, where each university rates its own admissions factors, grades lead rigor 96% to 91% among the Top 100 schools and 62% to 53% among universities overall.



> Within this context, some AP courses matter more than others. "Most schools, particularly hyper-selective ones, want to see students taking core subjects all four years whenever possible," says Mark. "While there may be some flexibility with foreign languages and social sciences, four years of Math and English are definite expectations." Those flexible slots are where course choice pays the highest dividends.

In some cases, the data suggests relatively easy swaps: Biology over Physics 1, for example, or European History over World History, assuming both are options.

In other areas, it's more complicated. Statistics (+3.23%) offers a higher lift than Calculus AB's -1.26%, but at highly selective schools, our former admissions officers treat AP Calculus as non-negotiable. Statistics is a useful addition only after the calculus "requirement" is satisfied, and if courses like Multivariable Calculus aren't available.

AP decision-making matrix

01

Weigh more than admission outcomes

The right course schedule depends on what a school offers, how much a student can reasonably carry, and what else fills their week.

02

Know what target schools want

Highly selective schools expect certain courses on the academic transcript. “Students should strive to reach AP Calculus by the end of senior year,” says Mark.

03

Take the hardest courses available

Admissions officers read each academic transcript against the AP courses a school actually offers. A student at a school with six APs isn’t compared to a student at a school with 22.

04

Protect the GPA

A heavy course load won’t offset a weak GPA. Students should “take on the most rigorous schedule they can handle,” says Cassidy Martin, a former assistant director of international admissions at Smith College, “and show an upward trend in grades.”

Choosing by major

Applicants at the most selective universities often take 12 to 15 APs, according to our counselors. Only 13 courses show an admissions advantage, and few schools offer all of them, so the rest of the schedule should serve a student's intended major.

We asked seven Empowerly counselors, all former admissions officers or long-serving experts, to rate AP courses for five major fields: core to the field, useful, a specialized path, or not relevant.

What to prioritize, by intended major

Counselor placement crossed with what our model found. Lift is the estimated relative change in a student's chance of admission at a 4.0 GPA.

- For STEM students, five courses are both core and associated with an admissions advantage: both Physics C courses, Calculus BC, Biology, and Chemistry. Business, by contrast, has only two: Calculus BC and Statistics.

- Future Business majors should choose more courses from the useful category, especially quantitative courses like Physics C: Mechanics. Highly selective business programs like Penn's Wharton School and NYU Stern expect rigorous quantitative APs from applicants, according to our business school admissions experts.

- In Arts & Humanities, three of the six core courses — World History, English Literature, and U.S. History — were either inconclusive or showed no measurable advantage. For these students, useful courses such as Biology and Psychology (yellow) matter as much as core courses (blue).

- Quantitative and lab sciences are core for STEM and Healthcare and useful for every other field. English Language and Statistics appear in every column, and Calculus BC appears in every column except Arts & Humanities. As noted previously, four years of math and English belong on every transcript, regardless of what a student plans to study.

Lift we can confirm | Lift, wider range | Useful, and a lift

No measurable lift | Too uncertain to call

** marks specialized courses, relevant to a path within a major, not the whole field. "Too uncertain to call" indicates a wide range of outcomes, from a meaningful lift to a meaningful loss. It does not mean the course showed nothing.*

STEM

Core, and a lift		Core, no measurable lift	Useful, and a lift	
Physics C: Mechanics	+7.31%	Calculus AB	Precalculus	+9.06%
Physics C: E&M *	+5.91%	Computer Science A	Psychology	+4.64%
Calculus BC	+5.18%	Physics 1	English Language	+4.04%
Biology	+4.58%		Statistics	+3.23%
Chemistry	+4.51%			

Healthcare

Core, and a lift		Core, no measurable lift	Useful, and a lift	
Psychology	+4.64%	Physics 1	Physics C: Mechanics	+7.31%
Biology	+4.58%		Calculus BC	+5.18%
Chemistry	+4.51%		English Language	+4.04%
			Statistics	+3.23%

Business

Core, and a lift		Core, too uncertain to call	Useful, and a lift	
Calculus BC	+5.18%	Macroeconomics	Precalculus	+9.06%
Statistics	+3.23%	Microeconomics	Physics C: Mechanics	+7.31%
			Psychology	+4.64%
			Biology	+4.58%
			Chemistry	+4.51%
			English Language	+4.04%

Social Sciences

Core, and a lift

Psychology	+4.64%
English Language	+4.04%
European History	+3.60%
Statistics	+3.23%

Core, no measurable lift

- U.S. History
- World History: Modern

Core, too uncertain to call

- Human Geography
- Macroeconomics
- Microeconomics

Useful, and a lift

Calculus BC	+5.18%
Biology	+4.58%
Chemistry	+4.51%

Arts & Humanities

Core, and a lift

Music Theory *	+11.80%
English Language	+4.04%
European History	+3.60%

Core, no measurable lift

- U.S. History
- World History: Modern

Core, too uncertain to call

- English Literature

Useful, and a lift

Psychology	+4.64%
Biology	+4.58%
Statistics	+3.23%

What this means for your family

Most course decisions happen years before an application is due, and early choices shape a student's senior-year options.

01 Map the math sequence early

Reaching AP Calculus BC by senior year usually means starting with Algebra I in eighth grade, or catching up later with a summer course or two math classes in one year. Calculus also opens other doors: College Board expects students in AP Physics C: Mechanics to have taken calculus. Check how your school's math courses lead to Calculus before ninth grade, while there's time to adjust.

02 Choose the advanced course when there's a choice

Calculus BC had a lift and Calculus AB didn't. Both Physics C courses leaned the same way. If your school offers the more advanced course and your child can do well in it, take it.

03 Prioritize courses that fit your child's intended major

Start with the courses in the majors matrix "core, and a lift" group in your child's intended field. Next, add courses from the "useful, and a lift" group as the schedule allows.

If your child hasn't picked a major, English Language, Biology, and Psychology appear in every column of the majors matrix, and all three seem to reliably help. That makes them strong choices for a student considering multiple paths.

Questions to ask your school counselor

Your child's school counselor knows what's possible at your school. Useful questions include:

> Which AP courses does the school offer, and in which grades can students take them?

> What are the prerequisites for Calculus BC and Physics C courses?

> Can students take two math courses in one year, or earn credit through summer or online?

> What does the school profile sent to colleges say about course offerings?

Why it matters

Six courses out of 36 showed an admissions advantage we could confirm. The largest, AP Calculus BC, is associated with a shift from a 65% chance of admission to 68.4%.

Three percentage points doesn't sound like much, and most AP courses can't be shown to deliver even that. But at schools where tens of thousands of qualified applicants compete for a few thousand seats, a margin you can count on matters. And for a student choosing between two courses that fill the same slot, it's one of the few admissions variables still in their hands.

Want to know what AP courses belong on your schedule next semester?

Whatever grade they're in, whatever their profile looks like

GET THE LIST

Endnotes

1 AP U.S. History (516,738 exams), AP World History: Modern (411,547), AP Calculus AB (285,891), AP Computer Science Principles (175,174), AP Physics 1 (174,401), and AP Computer Science A (93,217) together accounted for 1,656,968 of the 6,182,171 exams in 2025. Source: College Board, AP Program, Summary, 2025.

2 Estimates come from a Bayesian multilevel logistic regression fitted across the full range of GPAs in our data, adjusting for GPA. Ranges are 95% credible intervals: the span containing 95% of the values the model considers plausible. Percentages are relative changes in a student's chance of admission, calculated at a 4.0 GPA against the 65% baseline acceptance rate among Empowerly students across these 524 universities. GPA is reported by students' schools, and weighting conventions vary, so the adjustment is not uniform across students.

3 A course's effect is reliable when the range of plausible values spans less than 5.5 points of relative effect, about 3.6 percentage points at a 65% baseline for Empowerly students. Anything wider is more uncertainty than a scheduling decision should depend on. The cutoff is not a judgment call. Twelve courses have ranges between 3.89 and 5.36 points, and the next-widest is 5.67, so any cutoff between those two figures produces the same twelve. Sample size sorts them identically: every course with at least 2,000 students falls under the limit, and every course below 2,000 falls above it.

4 They land here for different reasons. For World History, Calculus AB, and Computer Science A, the model leans toward no benefit: each sits at a one-in-ten chance or less of any positive effect. Computer Science Principles is close to a coin flip. Physics 1 and U.S. History lean positive, but the model gives them roughly a one-in-five and a one-in-two chance of clearing a 2% lift, below what we were willing to call an advantage.