For Some Elite Colleges, It's Advanced Placement vs. Gen-Ed

By Dan Berrett

When the College of William & Mary announced recently that it was adopting new general-education courses, it also made sure all of its students would take them.

That’s because students entering in the fall of 2015 will no longer receive credits for the Advanced Placement examinations that many high-achieving students take in high school and that would previously have satisfied the Virginia college’s core requirements.

In doing so, William & Mary joined a small list of elite institutions that have become increasingly choosy about AP exams, which, like International Baccalaureate tests, colleges have long used to award credit to students in recognition of their advanced achievement in various subject areas.

The change also reflects a broader shift among colleges that are seeking to retool general-education curricula to make them emphasize intellectual skills instead of chiefly transmitting a body of knowledge through traditional survey courses.

The curricular changes at William & Mary affect courses taken during all four years of college, from the introductory level to capstone courses. The goal is to deliberately integrate disciplines, areas of knowledge, and ways of thinking—a process that previously tended to occur haphazardly, said Michael R. Halleran, the college’s provost. Most AP courses are not designed to draw connections between disciplines, either.

Mr. Halleran gave an example of how a course might change at his institution. As a classicist, he has long taught an introduction to Greek tragedy, but it will be revised. In its place: a course that
weaves in literature, religion, and anthropology. "It’s thinking beyond the discipline," he said. "Not even the best AP and IB courses do that."

Unlike other institutions that have recently changed their policies on AP credits, William & Mary wasn’t worried about the quality of AP and IB courses, Mr. Halleran said. Students there are awarded an average of 16 credits for exams they took in high school, and they can still receive college credit for them as electives and for certain departmental requirements.

Vanderbilt University’s College of Arts and Science similarly chose to restrict its policies for accepting AP credits in 2005, when it revised its general-education requirements. Faculty members capped at 18 the number of credits students could claim through AP exams. Vanderbilt’s college also stopped accepting those credits as replacements for required courses.

"There is one clear thing going on here," said Karen E. Campbell, senior associate dean for undergraduate education at the college, which is Vanderbilt’s largest. "We want students who graduate with a bachelor’s degree from Vanderbilt’s College of Arts and Science to have a Vanderbilt College of Arts and Science education."

Some supporters of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs argue that the small, advanced-level courses taken in high school can offer a better educational experience than the introductory ones that students sit through in college. At Vanderbilt, large survey courses remain in place. Instead of testing out of macroeconomics by taking an AP course in high school, for example, a student at Vanderbilt might take an entry-level course with several hundred students.

"It’s not ideal," Ms. Campbell said, adding that faculty members were using technology, such as clickers, to make large lectures more interactive than they had been in the past.

Vanderbilt’s decision to be more stringent in accepting AP credits reflected college officials’ concerns about the rigor of AP courses,
said Ms. Campbell.

Dartmouth College reached a similar conclusion last year, when it announced a more-sweeping decision. Starting this fall, it will not bestow credit for any AP exams.

"Ultimately, we would like a Dartmouth education to take place at Dartmouth," a spokesman said at the time.

But such policies are outliers, limited to a handful of highly selective institutions, said David T. Conley, chief executive officer of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, which conducts research on and raises awareness of college and career preparedness. The center also does consulting work for the College Board, the company that administers the AP.

Colleges are under increasing pressure to graduate more students while containing costs. Policy makers tout programs like the AP as benefiting institutions and students alike.

"The national trend is still in the other direction, which is for students to take more AP exams, score better, and receive college credits for them," Mr. Conley, who is also a professor of education at the University of Oregon, said in an email.

Indeed, the number of AP exams taken by high-school students has nearly doubled over the past decade, with more than one million students in the class that graduated last year having taken at least one, according to the College Board. (See a related article.)

And the number of colleges accepting AP credits shows little change. About 1 percent to 3 percent of colleges’ policies get modified each year, said Deborah Davis, director of college-readiness communications for the College Board. About 99 percent of colleges surveyed by the company grant credit for at least one AP exam, she said.

Federal data also show colleges’ acceptance of AP credits holding steady since 2004-5, the earliest year for which such information is available through the National Center for Education Statistics. In 2012-13, about 78 percent of degree-granting four-year
institutions accepted those credits, up just slightly from 76 percent eight years before.

Still, the changes taking effect at a few institutions do reflect a different sort of trend: the desire to improve general-education curricula so that they prod students to think deeply and critically about subjects in addition to transmitting content, said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which studies curricula and advocates for the liberal arts.

It is a continuing effort. The authors of "General Education in the 21st Century," a 2007 report commissioned by the University of California, cautioned that while AP courses were "generally positive in impact, these practices nonetheless raise new issues concerning the nature and quality of collegiate general education."

The authors called for faculty members to scrutinize the content and level of AP courses and exams to make sure they were consistent with the mission and goals of their institutions' general-education curricula.

But many AP courses may not fit into a changing notion of what general-education courses are supposed to accomplish, said Ms. Schneider. AP courses typically offer a broad survey of a discipline, she said, and their goal is often to convey large chunks of content. While some AP courses help students learn how to think or to reason in complex ways, not all do.

"It may or may not include the kinds of inquiry-driven practices and deep investigations that high-quality schools see as essential for their students’ learning," she said. "It’s not just ‘What’s the course covering’ but ‘What’s the educational strategy?’"