



**Tri-State
Consortium**

Scarsdale High School
TRI-STATE CONSULTANCY 2022
Advanced Topics Program Review
February 16 - 18, 2022

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Executive Summary

The Scarsdale School District invited a team of colleagues from the Tri-State Consortium to provide feedback on the district's Advanced Topics program. As articulated by Ken Bonamo, Principal of Scarsdale High School, the purpose of the visit, "...is to determine the extent to which the AT program is achieving the goals as originally articulated, the extent to which AT courses promote critical and creative thinking and prepare our students for college."

Scarsdale is a long-standing, valued member of the Tri-State Consortium, which comprises over fifty school districts in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and describes its mission as: *"...a dynamic learning organization of public schools that values systems thinking as the foundation for continuous improvement. The Consortium assists its member districts in using quantitative and qualitative data to enhance student performance and to build a rigorous framework for planning, assessment and systemic change..."*. Now in its third decade, the Consortium's core beliefs remain focused on authentic, interdisciplinary teaching and learning and purposeful assessment practices that are directly linked to optimal student performance.

Working together as critical friends, the visit team spent three days in Scarsdale High School, examining an extensive collection of digital evidence prepared to focus and guide our thinking, visiting several high school AT classrooms, and interviewing teachers, counselors, department chairs, district office and high school administrators, students, alumni, parents, and the president of the Board of Education.

The History

The Scarsdale School District shifted from Advanced Placement courses to Advanced Topics courses in the 2007-08 school year, after the faculty and administration expressed growing concern with Advanced Placement courses and studied the possibility of a transition over the previous two years. The principal of the high school at that time, John Klemme, indicated that the high school faculty was "virtually unanimous" in support of this transition, writing in a memorandum to the superintendent, Michael McGill, "Nearly every department is ready to assume responsibility for shaping courses in some form to meet the requirements of a deeper and richer curriculum in the coming school year."

The proposal for transitioning from Advanced Placement courses to Advanced Topics courses was rooted in several aspirational goals. One was shifting emphasis from preparing students for the summative examinations that accompany Advanced Placement courses to, "... a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of issues unique to each subject area that will better prepare our students for college study. The goal of the program is to improve research skills, to enhance

writing skills, and to cultivate the capacity to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and make judgments about the significance and value of subject content.”

A second goal was freeing faculty and students from constraints placed on Advanced Placement courses by the College Board, constraints that were perceived by the faculty and administration as interfering with student and faculty interest and depth of study, and instead engendering a “race” to cover large swaths of the curriculum in a largely superficial manner to prepare students for the Advanced Placement examinations in early May of each year.

A third, and related, goal was to “deepen the study of the sciences, the humanities, and mathematics by cultivating a true love of learning that we believe will not only enhance student preparation for exams should they elect to sit for them, but more importantly, promote in our students an appreciation for the layers of complexity that can be found in academic subject areas.”

As the transition was being debated, some parents and students expressed concerns about students losing the opportunity to take Advanced Placement examinations, arguing that AP exams are connected to credit-bearing and course placement matters at the college level. Thus, the proposal for a transition from AP to AT included provisions for students to sit for AP examinations near the conclusion of AT courses if they wished to do so. The proposal also indicated that although the deeper content of AT courses should prepare students well for success on AP examinations, the faculty would also provide opportunities for students to become familiar with the format and structure of AP exams through practice examinations and preparation lessons.

It should be noted that over the past fifteen years, the district has experienced a diminishing level of participation in AP exams, with the exception of mathematics, where there has been an increase in performance. The district reports that students are making decisions about whether to take AP exams based on their college selection and how their intended college will treat AP exam scores, in addition to their self-assessment of likely performance on the exam. This allows them to make well-reasoned decisions regarding exam preparation in the context of their overall academic experience.

In developing the proposal for the transition from AP to AT, the district contacted the admissions officers of the colleges and universities to which Scarsdale High School seniors typically applied to ensure that it would have no negative impact on students. Principal Klemme reported that “... colleges have been extremely encouraging in their willingness to consider alternatives to the current AP structure,”... and that Scarsdale “students will enjoy a level of distinction as a result of the faculty initiative to refine courses for depth of understanding, a fact confirmed by the enthusiastic support of college admissions officers.”

The initial proposal called for external validation of the AT curricula, in various forms. Upon initiation of courses, the curricula were shared with distinguished professors from colleges and universities to determine the extent to which they prepared students for the expectations of post-secondary education.

Two other forms of validation mentioned in the initial proposal were annual symposia that would bring together Scarsdale High School faculty with college and university professors to discuss learning outcomes, and the creation of partnerships with venerated content-focused organizations, such as the American History Association. Over time, these forms of external validation have been occurring less formally and with less frequency. University professors continue to be invited to the district when teachers initiate new courses – for example, the high school’s AT math courses were recently reviewed by professors at Fordham University.

The initial proposal acknowledged the need to monitor the impact of the transition, and offered several ways for that to occur. In addition to external validation by college and university professors, the intent was to have the faculty create common assessments and develop curricula that had “key, measurable, learning outcomes.” And, the proposal stated that faculty members would work in collaboration with department heads to examine assessment results and discuss their implications for instruction. These monitoring structures have occurred informally and intermittently over the years.

Also, the proposal indicated that “the district would solicit feedback from college and university personnel admissions offices following each admissions cycle with the goal of determining whether the program has affected the attractiveness of Scarsdale students as prospective candidates,” and would “also follow cohorts of students in an effort to understand the program’s effect on their college experience.” According to the school’s guidance counselors and administrators, college admissions officers continue to acknowledge the rigor and speak in support of Scarsdale’s AT courses, Scarsdale High School students continue to gain admission into the nation’s top colleges and universities, and the district continues to survey alumni regularly.

The most recent survey posed questions about the impact of AT courses. In the fall of 2019, the district surveyed three classes of graduates (the classes of 2014, 2016 and 2018) to obtain feedback from alumni on their perceptions of their Scarsdale education. A little over 100 alumni responded to the survey, representing about 10% of the graduates in these three classes. Three questions in the survey were specific to the AT Program.

1. Alumni were asked how important it was that their AT courses prepared them for corresponding AP exams: 41% indicated it was very important, 39% said it was somewhat important, and 21% said that it was unimportant.
2. Alumni were asked how well AT courses prepared them for their college introductory courses: 53% said that AT courses provided excellent preparation, 30% said the preparation was good; 16% responded neutral, and 2% said their preparation was poor

or unsatisfactory. The mean rating for AT course preparation for college on a scale of 1 to 5 was 4.33.

3. Alumni were asked how they perceived their preparation for college compared to their college classmates who had taken AP courses: 40% said they were better prepared, 46% said that they were prepared about the same, and 14% said they were not as well prepared as their classmates from other high schools.

Alumni also were given an opportunity to respond to an open-ended question about how they perceived their experiences in AT courses vis-a-vis AP courses. The visit team had access to these responses, which represented a mix of opinions reflective of the percentages reported in each of the three questions.

Finally, a major component of the transition was seen as curriculum development. Principal Klemme indicated that faculty members would develop courses consistent with the proposal's goals, and would modify their curricula based on annual review of student results.

Implementation Guidelines

Along with the initial proposal came a set of implementation guidelines. There is no need to review them in great detail in this report, but they included the following plans:

- The faculty would develop a common course outline for each AT course, along with common experiences, assignments, projects, and a common assessment – all intended to “promote higher order thinking skills and habits of mind.”
- The outlines would be distributed to the students in each class at the onset of each new semester.
- The teachers of AT courses would discuss with students’ ways to prepare for Advanced Placement examinations, should they wish to sit for them. Practice AP exams would be provided to students throughout the year. AT students would meet with their guidance counselors to discuss the ramifications of taking or declining to take the AP exams.
- A “Visiting Professor” program would bring professors from colleges and universities to the high school to meet with faculty members. Together, they would review AT curricula and examine student work. Moreover, professors would offer their input about additional course offerings and preferred instructional approaches, share their views on the skills incoming first-year students would need, and offer thoughts on recent developments in their fields.
- Standing committees, involved in the development of the proposal, would monitor the impact on college admissions.

Some of these implementation guidelines have been enacted to varying degrees over the years. Subsequent sections of this report will address ways to enhance alignment with these initial guidelines.

The Study

A Tri-State team of 12 colleagues spent three days at Scarsdale High School – February 16-18, 2022. The visit team members were:

Lauren Allan – Senior Associate, Tri-State Consortium
Elizabeth Clain – Principal of Mamaroneck High School
Eric Contreras – Principal of North Shore High School
Stephanie Greenberg – Supervisor of Humanities, Princeton Public Schools
Brian Gutherman – English Department Chair, Ardsley High School
William Meyer – Secondary Instructional Staff Developer, Rye High School
Adam Pease – Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction, Chappaqua School District
Kathleen Reilly – Director of Training, Tri-State Consortium
Robert Shaps - Superintendent of Schools, Mamaroneck School District
Suzanne Short – Interim Principal, Rye High School
Darla Smyth – English Teacher and Capstone Seminar/Research Director, Hewlett-Woodmere School District
Martin Brooks – Executive Director, Tri-State Consortium

The visit team was charged with examining the district’s Advanced Topics program through two lenses. The first lens is a set of three Essential Questions posed by the district:

- *To what extent are there clear expectations for success in AT courses?*
- *To what extent do our AT courses promote critical and creative thinking, creativity, and deep learning?*
- *To what extent is our AT approach preparing our students for post-secondary education?*

The second lens consists of three indicators from the Tri-State Consortium’s model of systemic performance: performance-based assessment; curriculum & instruction, and shared vision.

Scarsdale High School offers 25 Advanced Topics courses, several of which - Entrepreneurship, US Constitutional Law, International Relations, Spanish Literature, and Linear Algebra (which will be implemented in 2022-23) - are unique courses without analogs in Advanced Placement.

Below is a list of all 25 AT courses that have been approved as components of the Scarsdale High School curriculum.

1. Art History
2. 2-D Studio Art
3. 3-D Studio Art
4. Entrepreneurship
5. English
6. Statistics
7. Calculus AB
8. Calculus BC
9. Linear Algebra (new for 2022-23)
10. Music Theory
11. Biology
12. Chemistry
13. Physics (Mechanics)
14. U.S. History and Government
15. Comparative Governments with Economics
16. Macroeconomics with American Government and Politics
17. American Government and Politics with Economics
18. Western Political, Economic, and Cultural Traditions
19. United States Constitutional Law
20. International Politics and Economics: Global Issues in the 21st Century
21. Psychology
22. French Language
23. Spanish Language
24. Spanish Literature
25. Mandarin

Findings, Thoughts, Questions, and Suggestions

Response to Essential Questions

This section of the report will address the district's three essential questions, and the three Tri-State Consortium indicators that the district asked the visit team to examine.

Essential Question #1:

- ***To what extent are there clear expectations for success in AT courses?***

By all conventional measures, the Advanced Topics program at Scarsdale High School is successful – the teachers have expertise in their course subjects, the students perform at high levels, those students who opt to take Advanced Placement examinations score well, and colleges and

universities recognize the high school's AT courses as rigorous and demanding. Perhaps equally important, after fifteen years the AT program continues to enjoy strong support from the high school's administration, faculty, guidance counselors, and students.

When new AT courses are proposed, they must pass through a thorough and exacting approval process. Proposed courses are developed by teachers, reviewed by the appropriate department chair and, if approved, sent to the school's administrative cabinet. The cabinet then makes a recommendation to the high school principal, who makes the final decision about whether to recommend including the course in the school's AT program. Additionally, new course curriculum is reviewed by a university professor with expertise in the subject matter.

As examples of how courses are created, the AT Entrepreneurship course was introduced as part of the STEAM program, conceived as the capstone course in a three-year elective sequence. The course was designed by the district's STEAM coordinator, in conjunction with an associate professor of engineering at Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering and a Co-Director of the Design Initiative at Dartmouth. The Constitutional Law class, which is not currently being offered, was designed by a former faculty member who was an immigration-rights attorney and brought her law background to the design of the course. The AT course in International Relations is broader than the comparable AP comparative governments course, engaging students in exploring today's ever-shrinking world. Linear Algebra, the high school's newest AT course, will commence in the 2022-23 academic year and will provide a new path for students who are double-accelerated in their math sequence (those who take Calculus before the senior year) to have a teacher-led course beyond calculus in the high school.

Although the initial AT course approval process is well established, the visit team perceived that AT courses could benefit by developing a set of criteria for periodic curriculum review, which was envisioned in the initial proposal. Our sense is that organizing a course review cycle – perhaps triennially – would enable ongoing monitoring of the courses and ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and dynamic in an ever-changing world.

If a periodic review process is established, the visit team wonders about who might be involved. Having the same person conceive, develop, implement and evaluate a course seems limited, leading the visit team to suggest that curriculum review would be enhanced by broad involvement of staff (and perhaps students, as well).

The visit team also had robust discussions about the word “success,” which is open to multiple interpretations. Our suggestion is that the high school engage the AT faculty in a process that would result in a common definition of success – what are the criteria that define the AT program as successful, what are the criteria that make individual AT courses successful, and what are the criteria that make the students participating in AT courses successful? These are important questions to resolve. Defining these expectations more clearly can be productive for the AT

program, overall, for the teachers who conduct AT courses, and for the students who participate in them.

We were told that some parents and students worry that the AT program prevents Scarsdale High School from inclusion on some lists of the top high schools in America (those lists that use AP participation as the main criterion), that it has negatively impacted college and university admissions, and that it denies Scarsdale High School students the benefit of obtaining college credit and attaining placement in upper level college courses as freshmen. Moreover, not everyone with whom we spoke understands that AT courses are intended to be equivalent to first-year college courses.

Thus, the visit team recommends that these concerns be addressed annually, and directly, as new cohorts of students and parents enter the high school. Perhaps a brief Q & A “branding” document would be a helpful way to address some of the questions and misperceptions of parents and students – sharing accurate college acceptance data; listing the colleges that continue to (and no longer) grant credit for AP courses; listing the purpose of AT courses (critical thinking, creativity, depth of study, greater student agency, and enhanced personal advocacy), and sharing student testimonials and samples of student work.

When the initial proposal for transition from AP to AT was presented to the Scarsdale Board of Education, permitting students to sit for AP examinations was a late addition to the proposal. From political, financial and educational perspectives, the visit team understands why. However, after fifteen years of implementation and a changed and evolving college admissions landscape, we wonder about the extent to which remaining tethered to AP exams prevents the AT program from fully reaching its objectives, and interferes with how “success” might be defined if this provision were dropped. The visit team worries that the AT program will struggle with its own identity as long as it remains linked to AP exams. We understand the deeply-rooted issues embedded in a change of this magnitude, and are gently raising this not for immediate action but as a question for debate and consideration as the district ponders the AT program’s next level of development.

Finally, in thinking about the extent to which there are clear expectations for success in AT courses, the visit team suggests that it could be useful for the administration and faculty to review the initial proposal for transition from AP to AT, revisit the reasons for proposing this shift in 2006 to determine if they still hold – the visit team perceives that they do – and craft a new vision statement redefining the purposes of AT courses in today’s world.

Essential Question #2:

- ***To what extent do our AT courses promote critical and creative thinking, creativity, and deep learning?***

After reviewing documentary evidence, interviewing students, parents, teachers, counselors, department chairs, alumni, administrators, and a Board of Education member, and visiting AT classrooms, the visit team can state confidently that Scarsdale High School's AT courses promote critical and creative thinking, creativity, and deep learning.

We saw many examples of deep and meaningful student work, both online and in classrooms. For example, students in AT US History courses are asked to develop their own DBQs, (and parts of the AT Psychology class are structured around students' interests). Students and alumni spoke in glowing terms about their AT experiences, some calling them transformative. Parents also perceive that their children's AT courses provide opportunities for deep exploration of authentic content.

The visit team wondered about the extent to which the intent and impact of AT courses have transcended the laudable goals embedded in this essential question – critical and creative thinking, creativity and deep learning. In conversations with teachers, parents and students, we heard that AT courses also engender student agency, independent learning, and self-advocacy. Here, again, we think that it may be a propitious time for the AT staff, in conjunction with administration and students, to review the initial AT proposal and bring it into line with what AT courses currently seek to provide participating students.

In hearing people speak so positively about AT courses, the visit team pondered the question of assessment. As is the case in many school districts, there is a disconnection in Scarsdale between what is valued (e.g., critical thinking, creativity, deep learning, etc.) and what is assessed. Most of the information that comes to school districts are data around skills and content-related information, very little of which relate directly to the worthy outcomes they seek to develop with their students. However, all districts generate evidence in classrooms every day about the extent to which students think critically, solve problems, and innovate. We suggest that the AT teachers meet to discuss how to identify the evidence that would enable them to know whether their students are thinking critically, creating, and going deeply into issues, and how to capture that evidence in ways that would enable them to tell the fuller story of the AT program's impact on student learning.

Another benefit of the AT program, shared with us by teachers and students, is the opportunity to think like a person engaged in a specific discipline. For example, we heard that the math courses are intended to help students think like mathematicians, the social studies courses help students think like historians, and the art courses engage students in thinking like artists. One staff member with whom we spoke said, "Advanced Placement courses are a promise to students – we will do all we can to help you excel on the AP exam ... AT courses also are a promise – we will teach you to think like a person in the discipline." This is an important promise to fulfill, and an equally important goal to convey to students and parents, and it is linked to assessment: to

what extent are AT course assessments designed to promote thinking like a writer, an historian, a musician, a scientist or a mathematician?

Similar to the visit team's thinking about the importance of engaging the faculty in defining success, we also think it could be helpful to engage the faculty in more clearly defining the skills and dispositions embedded in this essential question – critical thinking, creativity and deep thinking. The pending Profile of a Scarsdale High School Graduate may help in this effort, and our sense is that this work might also include examples/exemplars of what each skill/disposition looks like in the classroom. We suggest that bringing faculty members together around a protocol, such as Looking at Student Work, could assist in this endeavor. Moreover, holding focus group sessions with students around their sense of how these terms are defined and implemented in AT courses also can be instructive.

Finally, the visit team had questions about the extent to which entrance exams for AT courses are aligned with critical thinking, creativity and deep learning. Some of what we saw (e.g., timed writing) seemed out of step with AT program goals. Our sense is that it will be important to review AT entrance exams to ensure that they are appropriately aligned with AT program goals.

Essential Question #3:

- ***To what extent is our AT approach preparing our students for post-secondary education?***

In beginning to answer this question, we reiterate that the Scarsdale High School guidance counselors track college applications and acceptances annually. They reported to us that the school's acceptance rate at the nation's top tier colleges and universities remains at the same high level it held before the switch from AP to AT.

The visit team perceives that the Advanced Topics courses are preparing students well for post-secondary education (as, we suspect, do the high school's other courses). Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of all seniors in Scarsdale High School have taken at least one AT course during their high school careers. This is an impressive number.

In conversations with current students and alumni, the visit team was told that alumni felt exceptionally well-prepared when they began their college careers, and current students express confidence that they will be well-prepared. It is important to reiterate that AT courses are designed to correlate with first-year college courses, so students who take AT courses are getting an experience similar to what a freshman year course would provide.

Students and teachers spoke with us about the flexibility of AT courses. When major events occur, students are permitted – encouraged, actually – to discuss them in class. Examples shared

with us were the killing of George Floyd and the 2020 election results. This is similar to how many college courses operate – students are given time and space to explore not just the content of their courses, but also major events that unexpectedly arise during a course, and, where applicable, how those events connect to the content of their courses.

The preponderance of college courses encourages student independence, self-advocacy and student choice. These are hallmarks of many AT courses at Scarsdale High School. Students are encouraged to identify areas of interest (one student told us that students are encouraged to define their own questions to research and study), and the curriculum allows for pursuit of those interests. Alumni reported that AT courses prepared them to feel comfortable requesting meetings with their college professors and advocating for their own academic desires and needs. We also were told by students and alumni that AT courses expose them to a “philosophy of problem solving,” which is another advantage in post-secondary education.

In closing our response to this essential question, we wish to draw the school’s attention to the growing movement toward test-optional college admissions, which has diminished the importance of SAT and ACT scores (although not necessarily for some of the schools to which Scarsdale High School students typically apply). If this trend continues, colleges and universities may seek another metric by which to gauge the likelihood of student success. We suggest keeping an eye on this, and beginning to think about ways to provide different forms of information to admissions officers. We know that Scarsdale High School currently is examining the Mastery Learning Transcript. This potentially may provide a way to separate Scarsdale High School students from other students applying to the same institutions.

Performance Indicators

In addition to the three essential questions posed to the visit team, Scarsdale High School also asked the visit team to examine the AT program through the lens of three indicators contained in the Tri-State Consortium’s model of systemic performance. This next section of the report will look at performance-based assessment (Indicator #1), curriculum & instruction (Indicator #4), and shared vision (Indicator #7).

Tri-State Consortium Indicator #1: Performance-Based Assessment

Educators utilize performance-based assessments that capture the extent to which students are able to transfer, apply and construct knowledge. These assessments enable students to demonstrate their ability to integrate knowledge, skills, dispositions, and higher-level thinking within and across disciplines. Performance-based assessments typically are student driven, long-term, research based, and interdisciplinary. Student work is assessed against a set of common criteria, and results are used to gauge student understanding of complex concepts and, over time, to inform curriculum and instruction.

The visiting team was impressed with some of the AT assessments we viewed online, several of which are long-range, interdisciplinary, research-based, and student driven. Other assessments we viewed; however, were more traditional – multiple-choice questions, short answer questions, and questions aligned with AP exams.

Science provides a good example. While students in the AT Physics course were asked to engage in a quarter-long project around the question: “Is the human race fundamentally better off for having unlocked the secret of nuclear power?” which requires students to conduct research and delve deeply into a big question, other assessment tasks in Physics and in other AT science courses appeared to be more closely aligned with AP exams.

In our view, the AT program is an ideal host for genuine performance-based assessment – students are not confined by the requirements of preparing for a test that measures content coverage, nor are they bound by time constraints. The students and alumni with whom we met spoke positively of performance-based assessments, viewing them as opportunities to demonstrate the full range of their interests and knowledge.

The visiting team suggests engaging AT faculty in professional development focused on performance-based assessment – how these assessments are created, implemented, benchmarked, and used to inform future instruction. We also wonder if it would be possible, and beneficial, to develop a common rubric that can be used across AT subject areas – a rubric that would enable the high school to focus on and capture desired outcomes, such as critical thinking, creativity, and deep learning, and might also include other criteria, such as student agency and independence.

One final point on performance-based assessment. The education writer, John Merrow, suggests that the following two questions, using the same five words, are indicative of a dramatic difference in approach to teaching and learning: “How intelligent is this child?” v. “How is this child intelligent?” One question is limiting and indicative of a fixed mindset, while the other is embrative and represents a growth mindset. Performance-based assessment permits students to demonstrate the various ways in which they are intelligent.

Indicator #4: Curriculum and Instruction

Teachers and administrators collaborate to develop an articulated and aligned curriculum designed to ensure optimal student results. When making curricular and instructional decisions, teachers and administrators consider current research and evidence of student performance from multiple sources. In their planning, teachers purposefully select and differentiate strategies and resources that advance the learning of all students.

The visit team perceives that most of the AT curriculum we saw, both online and in classrooms, is rigorous and compelling for students. To reiterate, we think it would be helpful to review the curriculum cyclically, both to keep it relevant and fresh and to engage the faculty in periodic examinations of the content to which students are exposed across the AT landscape. Having multiple sets of eyes on curriculum, particularly when those eyes belong to people who teach similar courses with similar students, is always a helpful practice.

The visit team was surprised not to see more interdisciplinary work within the AT program. In our view, there are numerous opportunities for cross-pollinating courses dealing with similar subjects or similar time periods. We think interdisciplinarity could be helpful for students in understanding complex concepts, and we suggest that the AT faculty be given time to explore the possibility of building interdisciplinarity into the program. A positive side benefit of doing this would be creating opportunities for teachers to collaboratively dig into and develop a greater understanding of each other's courses.

The visit team wondered why there is only one AT English course. We are not suggesting the creation of an 11th grade AT English course to go along with the 12th grade course, or that AT English be structured similarly to AP English (i.e., AP Literature and AP Language), but we are suggesting that there could be differently-themed AT English courses that might engage a wider range of students.

We also wondered about instructional practice in AT courses. Most of the teachers with whom we spoke indicated that teaching an AT course did not require a shift in their pedagogy. The visit team's sense is that teaching an AT course, with emphasis on depth, creativity and critical thinking, may be different than, say, teaching an AP course that emphasizes coverage of curriculum and concludes with a content-based examination.

Therefore, we suspect that there have been pedagogical shifts among the AT faculty, and we think it could be instructive to engage the faculty in identifying what those shifts have been ... and might yet be. We want to make two points here, both related to the possibility of having the faculty agree on a common theory of learning that might frame the pedagogy of AT courses. First, when working with students who are deemed capable of success in AT studies, it could be helpful to use an "If/Then" construct, perhaps something like, "If we believe that these students are capable of critical thinking, creativity, deep learning and innovation, then ..." Then, what?

Second, there is a difference between information, which consists of facts and raw data, and knowledge, which is understanding how facts and data relate to each other, and is influenced by experience. The visit team understands the importance of enabling students to acquire information. We also see AT courses as wonderful opportunities for students to transfer and apply the information they are acquiring, and to construct new knowledge – both of which are aligned with self-advocacy and independence by offering students greater voice and choice.

Indicator #7: Shared Vision and Environment for Change

Shared vision and goals focused on student performance have been developed with the staff and community, are well articulated, clearly communicated, consistently pursued throughout the district and school community, and include student voice. This vision expects, supports, and recognizes risk taking, creativity, and innovation as components of change toward continuous improvement. There is a process to review student and teacher work and learn from experimentation.

Everyone with whom we met expressed strong support for the AT program – parents, students, alumni, administrators, counselors, department chairs, the Board of Education member, and perhaps most enthusiastically and passionately, teachers. Clearly, there is a shared vision about the importance and efficacy of the AT program, a vision that values risk taking, creativity and innovation.

Within that broad vision, there are differences about a few aspects of AT. For example, some people advocate breaking completely with Advanced Placement and no longer offering AP examinations to students, while others see merit in continuing to have the school administer AP exams to students who wish to take them; and some think that prerequisites for entrance into AT courses should be eased so that the number of students participating in AT courses can grow, while others perceive that the current entrance requirements are appropriate and the number of students participating in AT courses is best kept at the current level. Going forward, these are important conversations for the faculty and administration to have.

There is some tension, as exists in all schools, between honoring teacher agency and the desire for greater consistency of approach. Parents, for example, told us that they would appreciate more transparency in AT course requirements and more consistency in how AT courses are taught ... but they also understand the value of teacher agency. AT teachers expressed great appreciation for the freedom they have in structuring and teaching their courses. The visit team suggests that this is also an important discussion to have: is more consistency important, and if so, where: in course expectations; in course implementation, in course assessment? This question represents the classic “what v. how” conundrum in education – the desire for consistency in “what” is being taught balanced with the need to accept and appreciate latitude in “how” it is being taught.

Finally, as discussed earlier in this report, the visit team suggests creating processes for reviewing student and teacher work. Bringing faculty together to collaboratively examine samples of student work in all AT courses can shed light on the skills and dispositions students are demonstrating, and the impact of different approaches to instruction. It is one thing to pre-identify desired outcomes and then attempt to assess the extent to which those outcomes are being reached, and it’s another thing to look at actual student outcomes and determine the extent to which they are aligned with the AT program’s vision, and what, if any, changes are

suggested by these outcomes. Looking at student work can provide an important window into the impact of AT courses.

Additional Thoughts & Closing

Before closing, we wish to share a few thoughts on other matters the visit team discussed. First and foremost, the visit team consistently applauded Scarsdale High School for implementing the AT program. We see emphasizing critical thought, innovation, depth and agency as important goals for young thinkers. We also applauded the district's decision to uncouple learning from Advanced Placement assessments, in support of those goals.

Our enthusiasm for Scarsdale's approach with AT students led us to wonder about the extent to which this thinking about student learning has seeped into other parts of the school's educational program. For example, are non-AT courses being taught with these outcomes in mind? Are non-AT courses contemplating performance-based assessment of student learning? Our sense is that although the AT content may not be seen as appropriate for all students, the AT approach to learning might be.

We also discussed whether disaggregating AP test data might be helpful in understanding which students decide to take AP exams and which students don't, and also might shed light on whether there are disproportional subgroups of students – by gender, ethnicity, or ability – who tend to take or shy away from specific exams. This could be useful information to have in making placement recommendations.

In closing, it is impossible to overstate how impressed the visit team was with the teachers, counselors, department chairs, administrators, parents, students, alumni, and Board of Education member with whom we met. Everyone was open, enthusiastic, and willing to share their views with us.

We also wish to thank the teachers who permitted us to observe their classrooms, and the Scarsdale steering committee members who helped to plan the visit and created an extensive online repository of documentary evidence for the visit team to examine.

We especially wish to thank Ken Bonamo, Chris Welsh, and Edgar McIntosh for their leadership and vision in raising the questions that framed the visit, and for their meticulous work in preparing for and overseeing this visit. Thanks also go to Thomas Hagerman, the district's superintendent of schools, who welcomed us and spent time meeting with us to share his thoughts about the future of AT in Scarsdale.

Finally, special thanks go to Kim Thomas and Bonnie Berry for organizing the logistics of the visit, including food and overnight accommodations. The hospitality and careful attention of the food preparation team was excellent, and we deeply appreciate them.