

**Original Article:**

**INVOLVEMENT IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT CLASSES  
AND BURNOUT IN COLLEGE**

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**Abstract**

Recent work has begun to investigate burnout experienced by students. Burnout is defined as including three major dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism about the value of one's work, and a feeling of inadequacy. Results of qualitative research have found that high-stakes tests like Advanced Placement (AP) tests can be a significant source of stress for high school students. Moreover, quantitative studies have also found inverse correlations between burnout and measures of cognitive function as well as high school and college grades. This study seeks to add to previous work regarding burnout in college students who have participated in AP coursework. High school graduates from the United States between ages 18 and 26 ( $n = 258$ ) completed an online survey, including the number of AP classes that they had taken, their college GPA, and the self-report School Burnout Index. Students who took AP classes in high school reported slightly higher levels of burnout in college; however, this difference approached but did not reach significance. The number of AP courses did not correlate with burnout levels. Burnout scores were, however, found to be negatively correlated with college GPA. Limitations of the study and areas for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** burnout, advanced placement, college, higher education, GPA

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## INTRODUCTION

Burnout is described as a persistent state of mind with three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and a persistent feeling of inadequacy (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, 1996; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Exhaustion can manifest itself in a lack of sleep and a feeling of being overwhelmed, while cynicism can be seen as apathy and nihilism (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). As Schaufeli et al. (2002) state, burnout “was originally restricted to the human services domain (e.g., health care, education, and social work)” (p. 464). However, the term burnout has recently been expanded to apply to other fields and populations.

Recently, research has shown that this concept can be applied to the academic experiences of students (Foust et al., 2009; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Peterson et al., 2009). According to Salmela-Aro and Read (2017), 26% of students in a Finnish university were found to be “inefficacious” - meaning that they felt significantly inferior as a student - one of the signs of experiencing burnout. In addition, burnout is directly related to mental health, a factor which continues to be of concern among college students around the world (Auerbach et al., 2016; Karyotaki et al., 2020). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the manual used by mental health practitioners in the United States to diagnose mental health problems, two of the three main aspects of burnout, fatigue and feelings of inadequacy, are also symptoms of two common mental health difficulties in the college population: depression and anxiety. In addition, a negative view of one’s self, others, and/or the world, which directly relates to the third aspect of burnout, cynicism, has been found to be a significant risk factor for the development of these mental health conditions (Rubenstein et al., 2016).

Research worldwide has found burnout in college students is related to other problems as well. For example, research with American university students has found an inverse correlation between students’ level of burnout and college grade point average (GPA), meaning that students who struggle the most with burnout also tend to have the lowest GPAs (May et al., 2015; May et al., 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Seibert et al., 2017). According to a study by Jiang et al. (2012), burnout was found to be negatively associated with cooperativeness in Chinese university students. In Chinese and German university students, burnout was found to be correlated with internet addiction (Peterka-Bonetta et al., 2019). In American undergraduate medical students, higher burnout was associated with complete avoidance of unpleasant experiences as well as a decrease in behaviors in service of one’s values (Kroska et al., 2017). Finally, burnout poses a risk not only to students, but to educational institutions as well, as burnout is associated with decreased student retention at universities globally (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020; Dyrbye et al., 2010).

The above findings highlight the importance of further investigation by social scientists regarding the experience of burnout in college students. For example, more

research is needed from those who study human well-being and the ways that social experiences, such as educational programs, impact well-being (e.g., psychologists, educators). In addition, a better understanding of the risk factors for college student burnout will be critical for social scientists investigating the student retention difficulties currently affecting many higher education institutions (e.g., sociologists).

Given that research indicates that burnout is associated with many difficulties, it is also important to determine what is contributing to burnout in college students. Research on stress related to academic success in American students suggests this experience starts as early as middle childhood. In a study conducted by the American Psychological Association (2009), 44% of children aged 8-17 reported that doing well in school was a major source of stress. In addition, more children endorsed school as a source of stress than any other stressor (e.g., family finances and relationships with friends and family). Moreover, nearly one-third of adolescents aged 13-17 endorsed getting into a good college and having a good future as a major source of stress.

One aspect of the high school experience in the United States that may add to student stress and exhaustion is the Advanced Placement (AP) program. The American College Board organizes AP tests all around the globe and vets the curriculum for a high school's AP courses. According to their website, the benefits of participating in the AP coursework and tests include that this allows students to “[show] colleges you’ve tackled college level-work” in a certain discipline as well as help “earn you college credits before you even set foot on campus” which can “open up time on your schedule or even let you graduate early” (College Board, 2020). However, research has found that AP tests can be a major source of academic stress during high school for many students (Peterson et al., 2009). In qualitative research that explored American high school students’ perspectives on AP classes, students reported that they found it difficult to have a social life as well as a healthy sleep schedule with AP coursework added to their schedule (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Other research on the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, a similar advanced-level college preparatory program offered around the world, has found that over one-third of IB students report feeling that their workload was “excessive, unmanageable, and/or detrimental to their well-being” (Taylor & Porath, 2006, p. 153). Additionally, many AP students report experiencing stress-levels which are considered a risk for psychopathology later in life (Suldo et al., 2019). For gifted students, especially those from Hispanic or low-income backgrounds, “succeeding in AP . . . courses came with powerful stakes attached” (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008, p. 208). Though students may have a sense of pride for the academic rigor of these classes, some also feel as if taking AP classes and tests is mandatory for having any kind of success in college (Park et al., 2014). AP teachers note this pattern in their students, reporting that students often view AP classes “as a credential or as a ticket to another level, instead of being viewed in the way they should be viewed: in terms of intellectual stimulation (...)” (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008, p. 207).

Much research has been done on the unique experiences of those identified by their schools as “gifted” and the challenges that these students face in advanced programs, such as overwhelming workload, heightened stress, lack of sleep and social life, and an increased pressure to succeed (Foust et al., 2009; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Peterson et al., 2009). In addition, as noted above, a substantial amount of research has found that burnout in college students is associated with a variety of difficulties. However, there is little research focusing on the relationship specifically between AP involvement in high school and later burnout in college, especially using quantitative methodology. The current study seeks to fill that gap by comparing burnout in American college students who have previously taken AP courses to those who have not, in addition to examining the correlation between the number of AP courses taken and burnout levels, and between burnout levels and college GPA. We hypothesize that students who have taken AP courses will report experiencing more burnout in college than those who have not, that the number of AP courses taken by students will positively correlate with burnout levels, and that burnout will inversely correlate with GPA for all students.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample consisted of 258 participants between the ages of 18 and 26 who graduated from high school in the United States of America and have experience in higher education. The mean age of the participants was 23.5 ( $SD = 1.9$ ). Regarding gender, 63% were female, 34% were male, 2% were nonbinary, and 1% chose not to answer. Regarding ethnicity, 69% identified as Caucasian or White, 10% identified as Asian, 6% identified as Black or African, 6% identified with two or more ethnicities, 5% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 3% identified as Native American, and 1% declined to answer. Regarding the participant’s level of education, 57% reported having a 4-year degree, 24% reported having some college experience but no degree, 10% reported having a professional degree, 7% reported having an associate degree, 1% reported having a doctoral degree, and 1 participant declined to answer. The mean college GPA of the participants was 3.4 ( $SD = 0.5$ ). The majority (84.5%) of the total sample ( $n = 218$ ) reported having taken AP courses. Regarding the number of AP courses, 15.5% of participants had none, 39.1% had taken one or two courses, 29.1% had taken three or four, 10.5% had taken five or six, and 5.8% had taken more than six courses.

### Materials

#### *School Burnout Inventory*

The School Burnout Inventory (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009) is a self-report measure of a participant’s burnout specifically in the educational environment. This survey includes

nine questions, with each question relating to one of the three symptoms of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy. Sample questions include: “I feel overwhelmed by my schoolwork”; “I feel a lack of motivation in my schoolwork and often think of giving up”; and “I used to have higher expectations of my schoolwork than I do now”. Answers are measured on a Likert scale (1 = completely disagree to 6 = completely agree). All answers are summed, with a minimum total score of 9 and a maximum score of 54. Previous research on the School Burnout Inventory has found that the scale demonstrates good psychometric properties. The Cronbach’s alpha for the overall burnout scale is .88, indicating good internal consistency (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). The measure also demonstrates strong concurrent validity. Previous research found that overall school burnout correlated positively with scores on the Finnish Depression Scale (Salokangas et al., 1994) ( $r = 0.60, p < 0.001$ ) indicating convergent validity; and correlated negatively with scores on the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale Student Version (Salmela-Aro, 2004) ( $r = -0.30, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the measure’s discriminant validity as well (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009).

### ***Advanced Placement Experience***

Participants were asked to self-report whether they had taken AP courses in high school, and if so, how many. The ranges of AP courses given on the survey were: “none”, “1-2”, “3-4”, “5-6”, and “7+”.

### ***College Grade Point Average (GPA)***

Participants were asked to self-report their college GPA.

### ***Demographics***

Participants were asked to self-report their age, ethnicity, gender, and educational level.

### ***Procedure***

The human research ethics board of the researchers’ university approved this study before data collection began. Participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk online system for research participation in exchange for monetary compensation. Participation was contingent on being between the ages of 18 and 26, having graduated from high school in the United States and having experience in higher education. The study was conducted utilizing an online Qualtrics survey. After consenting to participate in the study, participants filled out the School Burnout Inventory (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). Instructions which asked participants to answer the questions specifically regarding their feelings towards their schoolwork in college were added to the inventory. Finally, they reported their cumulative college GPA, the number of AP courses they had taken, and their

demographics before exiting the study. Participants were each compensated \$0.25 through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. After data collection was completed, the data were reviewed and participants were excluded if they provided incomplete data.

## RESULTS

To investigate the first hypothesis that students who took AP courses would have higher burnout scores than students who did not take AP courses, an Independent Samples *t*-test was conducted. Although those who had taken AP courses ( $M = 35.7$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) had slightly higher burnout scores compared to those who had not taken AP courses ( $M = 33.2$ ,  $SD = 9.4$ ), this difference approached, but did not reach significance,  $t(258) = 1.532$ ,  $p = 0.06$ .

To investigate the second hypothesis that there would be a positive correlation between the number of AP classes and the level of burnout, a Pearson correlation was conducted. Results did not support the hypothesis. The correlation between the number of AP courses and burnout scores was not significant,  $r(256) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .696$ .

A Pearson correlation was also used to investigate the third hypothesis that there would be a negative correlation between burnout scores and college GPA. The negative correlation between burnout and college GPA was significant,  $r(256) = -0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , supporting the hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

Research has found that all of the different dimensions of burnout are experienced by students in relation to their academic work. With the combination of cynicism, feelings of inadequacy, and exhaustion, the resultant burnout can lead to psychopathology, poor grades, behavioral problems, and an increased chance to withdraw prematurely from their education (Ackerman et al., 2013; Suldo et al., 2019; Mostert & Pienaar, 2020; Dyrbye et al., 2010). This research highlights the need to continue to understand the experience of burnout in college students. Current literature suggests that participation in high school AP classes in the United States may increase burnout. Therefore, the current study aimed to add to the growing body of literature regarding the problems associated with burnout in college students and further examine the possible association between AP high school coursework and college burnout.

The current study's finding that burnout scores and college GPA were significantly negatively correlated is consistent with previous literature (May et al., 2015; May et al., 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Seibert et al. 2017). This finding highlights the need to better

understand burnout in the academic life of students as well as its causes, as the effects of leaving it unchecked are detrimental to students as well as institutions.

The current study also found that participants who had taken AP classes in high school reported higher levels of burnout during college than those who did not; however, this difference approached but did not meet the standard for significance in social sciences research. This may be due in part to the lack of statistical power given that only 15.5% of students in the current study had not taken any AP classes. Given that the current study's results were approaching significance, and that previous research has found heightened stress levels in AP students (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013; Suldo et al., 2019), future research should continue to explore this potential difference.

In a 2008 study by Hertzberg and Callahan, students reported that AP coursework forced them to take away time from other things necessary for human happiness such as sleep and socializing. Therefore, the current study hypothesized that this sacrifice would be exacerbated with more AP courses and therefore more workload. Interestingly, although students who had experienced AP classes reported slightly higher rates of burnout, for participants who had taken AP courses, the number of AP classes they participated in was not associated with their burnout level.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of the current study's design is that it was a retrospective report for many of the participants and it is therefore possible that participants misremembered their past experiences related to burnout. (For example, 57% of the participants had already completed a four-year college degree.) As summarized by Schwarz (2007), "human memory imposes limits on what people can validly report on. Under most of the conditions of interest to health researchers, respondents have to rely on partial recall and extensive inference strategies when asked to report on their past behavior and experiences. These strategies result in biases that are well understood and difficult to avoid" (p. 16). Given this concern, two efforts were made to mitigate the effects of recall distortion in the current study. First, participants were required to be 18-26 years old, reducing the number of years since their college experience. Second, the study asked participants to connect their memories to a specific period in their life (i.e., the time period they were in college). When relying on recall of past personal experiences, Schwarz (2007) suggests that "the best a researcher can do is to use interviewing techniques that take the structure of autobiographical memory into account to facilitate recall. The structure of autobiographical memory can be thought of as a hierarchical network that includes extended periods (like "the years I lived in New York") at the highest level of the hierarchy" (p. 3). Nonetheless, it is still possible that participants may have misremembered their experiences, causing their reported burnout scores, grades, or experience in AP coursework to be different than if they had answered in the moment. Relatedly, the measure used for burnout, the School Burnout Inventory (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009), was not created to be used retrospectively.

Therefore, future investigations into this topic should either focus on current college students or make use of a longitudinal model with AP high school students answering questions about their burnout, and then reporting again throughout their college experience.

As mentioned earlier, a second limitation of the current study is that only 15.5% of the sample had not taken AP courses. Future studies should strive for a more even distribution to increase the power of the between groups analysis. It is possible that this contributed to the mean difference between the groups not reaching significance. In addition, participants who had taken AP courses reported the number of courses they had taken by choosing from specific ranges (e.g., participants who had taken two AP courses selected the option “1-2”). In order to more clearly investigate whether the exact number of AP courses relates to a student burnout, it is recommended that future research utilize text entry or singular numbered options for this variable instead. Given that the correlation results may have been limited by the response option ranges, the current researchers also ran a post hoc analysis to see if burnout level differed between participants with 1-2 courses and those who had participated in over 3 courses. This result was also insignificant, consistent with the finding that the number of AP courses was not related to the level of burnout in the current sample.

Lastly, given that the current study found a slight, although non-significant, difference between burnout in AP students and those without, more research is needed to investigate just how prevalent burnout is in students taking advanced coursework. In addition, given that previous research has found that stress may be higher for certain groups of students, subsequent research should also investigate factors that may moderate the relationship between AP courses and burnout in AP students. For example, it may be that students who already experience more stressors in their lives experience more burnout with AP coursework.

## **Conclusion**

The current research highlights the need for social scientists to continue to study the experience of burnout in college students in order to better understand its impact on both the individual (e.g., student mental health) and also the impact on broader society (e.g., universities' retention rates). In addition, more research is needed to further explore whether burnout is experienced more often by students in advanced placement high school courses, and whether this experience impacts certain groups of students in disproportionate ways (e.g., students with higher levels of pre-existing social stressors). Being a student can be like a career in itself, with students putting in thousands of hours over the course of their education in order to succeed. Therefore, it is no surprise that psychological constructs like burnout, formed to describe an experience in the workplace environment, are also applicable to educational ones, and that students taking on more advanced coursework than required for a high school diploma have reported deleterious effects to their physical and mental well-being.



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