

Letters to the Editor

• Brief letters—one or two pages—are more likely to be printed than are long ones, which may be cut.

The Fourth R: Relevance

It has become painfully evident to educators in recent years that a fourth R has been added to the traditional three Rs of education; namely Relevance. In the October issue of *American Biology Teacher* this trend is emphasized in two articles: the editor's column commenting on the Advanced Placement Examination, and Hurd's article, "Biology as a Study of Man and Society."

Somewhere along the line, we appear to have strayed from the kind of biology that is best for the high school adolescents who face us daily. Instead of satisfying their craving for knowing more about themselves as living organisms in today's fast-moving world, we are concentrating on molecular biology, biochemistry, and the biology of the frog, hydra, and earthworm.

Our priorities have been shifted. In essence, across the nation, we are now teaching a college-dominated course that may possibly be suitable for no more than the upper 10% of the high school population. This situation has been decried by a few lone voices from time to time, who have pleaded unsuccessfully for an evaluation of the widespread BSCS courses in terms of the *average* high school student. But up to now the impetus for "upgrading" high school biology has apparently had too much momentum for any concerns about relevance to be taken too seriously.

However, relevance is now too serious to be overlooked. It underlies the current ferment in college campuses and high school corridors. A good start for a revision of biology is suggested by Hurd in such topics as ". . . race, population, food resources, environmental quality, intelligence, genetic engineering, and human organ transplants." More remains to be done, and soon.

The time has come to teach teenagers about man—who now, unfortunately, continues to remain mostly man the unknown.

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Opinion on Advanced Placement

I was very interested in your editorial in the October issue of *American Biology Teacher*. I have taught advanced-placement biology for the past

eight years. Two years ago the advanced-placement teachers of Chicago organized and I was elected chairman of the biology committee. Our biology group meets at least six times during the school year and the A.P. exam is one of the hottest topics of discussion.

One of the major problems of the advanced-placement teacher is the philosophy and organization of his course. Students enrolled in an A.P. course usually plan to take the A.P. exam and hope to get college credit. Because of this the teacher is forced to provide a curriculum that is geared to present the utmost "factual" knowledge to prepare the students for the exam. This is extremely limiting for the creative teacher and forces an extremely detailed coverage of all the diverse areas of biology.

This brings me to the A.P. exam itself. Is it possible to effectively evaluate an entire year of biology when the student is required to answer only four or five questions? I agree wholeheartedly with your statement "Can the ability to recite the contents of college textbooks and *Scientific American* reprints . . . be equated with education in biology?" A college that gives credit for a high score on the exam acknowledges that what it feels is most important in a course is "paper learning." No evaluation is made of the benefits of a creative and innovative course that may not cover the total width of biology. What seems to be most important is the memorization of facts for the exam.

How does the freshman college course in biology compare with a good A.P. course? Last week I showed an instructor from the Chicago Circle Campus of the University of Illinois a copy of the unit on basic chemistry that my A.P. class was working on. The college instructor said that she would never dare to try to teach material of that complexity to her freshman class. Last Friday I administered a 60-question exam to my class. Out of 14 students, one achieved a perfect score and eight missed four or fewer questions. If the students are this good at absorbing material, think what they could try to achieve if turned loose to develop without the restraints of the A.P. curriculum and exam. Rather than emphasize creative investigation I have an obligation to pump them full of "book larnin'" to prepare them for all of the eventualities of the exam.

Finally, a major point must be raised. Are the A.P. exam scores of the students used to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructor? I know of several teachers who drive their students to the highest grade possible so that they could say that they had more 5s or 4s than another teacher.

Isn't there a better way?

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