

AP Music Theory and College: Coordinating the Curriculum

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This paper reports on the results of two descriptive surveys that assess the degree of alignment between the AP Music Theory curriculum and introductory college-level music theory and aural skills courses throughout the United States. One survey was sent to current high school AP Music Theory teachers, who specified how much time they spend on each topic within the AP curriculum. College faculty responded to the same list of topics, indicating when each is introduced across their 2-year music theory and aural skills curriculum. Comparing these results revealed competing themes of fluency and exposure. Curricular alignment and possible skill fluency occur when high school teachers spend substantial time on topics that are likely to be introduced in the first two semesters of college. In contrast, many high school teachers briefly expose students to topics that are typically saved for later semesters in college (due to requirements of the AP curriculum or personal pedagogical choice). The implications of both approaches are discussed, with focus placed on the extent to which each approach corresponds with the stated goals and challenges of both high school and college survey respondents.



The Advanced Placement (AP) Music Theory program is designed to prepare high school students for college-level music studies and provide an opportunity to earn college credit. The aim of this study is to assess the degree to which the AP curriculum aligns with the college music theory and ear training curriculum across the United States. The extent of that alignment could affect high school students' development of musical skills and understanding, preparation for college music courses, and likelihood of receiving college course credit after earning a satisfactory AP exam score. Information about this curricular alignment was gathered through two descriptive surveys, one for high school AP Music Theory teachers and one for college music theory faculty, with survey content guided by the course framework and curricular requirements provided by the College Board.¹ While the results of both surveys reveal agreement about the most beneficial aspects of the AP Music Theory program, they also reveal competing themes of fluency and exposure when examining the relationship between time spent in high school and typical semester of introduction in college for various concepts and skills.

¹ <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/pdf/ap-music-theory-course-and-exam-description.pdf?course=ap-music-theory>.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Previous research in both music theory and other fields has evaluated course content and trends, effective teaching strategies, and types of student assessments in high school and college. In STEM disciplines, scholars examine correlations between AP scoring and college admissions (Geiser and Santelices 2004, Camara and Michaelides 2005, Warne et al. 2015), equality and access (Solorzano and Ornelas 2002, Moore and Slate 2002, Sirin 2005, Hallett and Venegas 2011), and how the AP curriculum and exam affect or predict student success in college (Santoli 2002, Klopfenstein and Thomas 2009).² Studies specific to music theory less explicitly address the AP Music Theory program, but include discussion of exam scores in regard to college placement (Murphy and McConville 2017). Others assess specific types of teaching strategies, as in Paney and Buonviri's 2014 survey of approaches to teaching melodic dictation in the high school AP Music Theory classroom.³ Since the current study examines the degree to which the AP Music Theory curriculum and exam align with topics covered in typical first-year college courses, the following discussion summarizes previous studies that pertain to recent trends in music theory core curricula and assessment.

Richard Nelson conducted a survey for the College Music Society that examined topics and textbooks in the undergraduate core music theory curriculum, the use of placement exams, and the incidence of accelerated and/or rudimentary music theory courses (2002). Barbara Murphy and Brendan McConville recreated the survey and added questions about recent developments in pedagogy, including the integration of technology, writing, composition, improvisation, and performance in the curriculum and classroom (2017). Of interest are their findings on general undergraduate requirements, topics included in the curriculum, and placement exams. Based on their responses from 243 schools, 82.85% of 4-year institutions require a 2-year core curriculum that includes separate classes for written theory and aural skills (187). In addition, 67.90% of universities allow students to test out of written theory or aural skills classes, with the majority using an internal diagnostic exam for assessment.⁴

In a 2012 study, Elizabeth Marvin surveyed faculty from fourteen college and conservatory programs to assess the function of the theory core curriculum. Her survey elucidates how recent innovations within the field of music theory could impact both college and high school music theory classes. In particular, her results indicate

2 STEM refers to disciplines in science, technology, engineering, and math.

3 See also Lively (2007) and Buonviri (2018).

4 For additional surveys of the college music theory and ear training curriculum, see Livingston and Ackman (2003), Marvin (2012), Snodgrass (2016a), Snodgrass (2016b), Marvin (2018), and Palfry and Gilson (2018).

that music theorists are taking more responsibility for teaching the standard 2-year music theory and ear training core curriculum, which stands in contrast to the more “generalist” faculty of composers, performers, and teaching assistants (if an institution has a graduate program in music theory). This change modifies the curriculum from the more traditional model of the comprehensive musician to one that “prioritizes depth of knowledge over breadth of coverage” and is more centrally focused on tonal music and form (256).⁵ Likewise, developments in the field of music theory pedagogy have significantly impacted the creation of new textbooks and classroom approaches. Marvin notes that these developments can be generalized as a shift from traditional techniques to those that consider the “linear and contrapuntal underpinning of harmonic motion” and give “life and contexts to the harmonies under study” (2012, 257).

Another approach has been to study student aptitude in music theory upon entering college. Carol Livingston and James Ackman compared the results of a 1981 study at the University of Florida School of Music (N=58 students) with the results of a similar 2001 study at the same school (N=50 students) (2003). Both studies assessed the topics in which high school students felt most prepared upon entering the college music theory class, as well as how they ranked their training in those topics. When compared with the 1981 results, the 2001 survey showed notable increases in reported preparation for key signatures, triads, notation, melodic dictation, and part writing. In contrast, there was a decline in reported preparation in sight singing. Results from both 1981 and 2001 also indicate that private teachers have the most significant impact on students’ exposure to and understanding of music theory. In addition, the 2001 survey showed a sizable increase in the roles of high school band programs and music theory classes. Livingston and Ackman credit the National Standard for the Arts for positively affecting these changes, which has helped improve the scope and content of public-school music theory programs throughout the country.⁶

5 In a subsequent article, Marvin notes that “although more undergraduate core music theory courses are now taught by faculty trained as music theorists, the practice of assigning performers and composers to teach theory classes is still widespread (and may be a financial necessity in many institutions)” (2018, 60–61). She also notes that the CMS online Directory of Music Faculties (January 2018) listed 5,848 names that taught core areas of music theory, of which 54% were tenure-track, 15% full time non-tenure positions, and 31% part-time and emeritus faculty. She further sorted these by degree held and determined that “a little over 40% of the faculty teaching our undergraduate theory courses are primarily music theorists by training, with almost 60% of faculty coming from outside our discipline” (61).

6 Chin (2014) also assessed where incoming high school students receive the most music theory exposure. Like Livingston and Ackman (2003), her results indicate that high school band programs and private instruction are still the most important sources, but a significant increase is observed in choral programs and a significant decrease in high school music theory classes. For other studies of student preparation for music study in college, see Jones and Bergee (2008) and Vezza (2013).

METHOD

The current study expands on this previous research by more specifically examining the relationship between the AP Music Theory program and the 2-year college music theory and ear training curriculum. We designed two descriptive surveys using Qualtrics software and collected data between January and March of 2019. One survey was sent to current high school AP Music Theory teachers and the other to current college music theory faculty across the United States.⁷ Given that a satisfactory AP exam score could earn students credit for 1–2 semesters of college-level music theory and/or ear training, it is critical to understand what is typically covered within the first two semesters of most college curricula. For this reason, our survey focuses on when certain music theory and ear training topics are introduced across the four college semesters, rather than that they are simply included in general. We compare those semesters of introduction in college with the amount of time that high school teachers spend on the same topics. In addition, both surveys included questions about the AP Music Theory course and exam, time spent on general categories of topics, educational background and teaching experience, and other participant demographics. When selecting topics for the survey, we followed terminology and broad categories that are used within the AP Music Theory course and exam. Both surveys were conducted entirely online and all responses were anonymous, with participants taking approximately 20 minutes to complete all questions.

Participants

Current high school AP Music Theory teachers were sent an email invitation to participate in the survey (N=1543). Results are reported only for those who completed the entire survey (N=216, 14% response rate). Those 216 participants teach in 40 of the 50 states, have an average of 17 years of experience teaching music at the high school level, and an average of 9 years teaching AP Music Theory. College music theory faculty were also recruited with an email invitation, with email addresses collected from university websites and from the attendee list at the 2017 Pedagogy into Practice Conference. Of the 563 invited college participants, we will report the responses of the 90 who completed the entire survey (16% response rate). Those 90 participants teach in 32 of the 50 states, have an average of 10 years of experience teaching college

⁷ Prior to collecting this nation-wide data, we sent similar surveys to Texas AP Music Theory teachers and college music theory faculty in Texas. Results from that pilot study were presented at the 2018 convention of the Texas Music Educators Association.

music theory and ear training, and have taught courses in the 2-year sequence either currently or within the last five years. Example 1 presents additional demographic information about the high school and college survey participants.

		HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS	COLLEGE FACULTY
Sex	Female	38.43%	27.78%
	Male	60.65%	65.56%
	Prefer not to say	0.93 %	6.67%
Ethnicity	White	89.55%	92.31%
	Hispanic or Latino	3.64%	1.10%
	Black or African American	1.36%	0%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.91%	0%
	Asian	1.36%	2.20%
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.45%	0%
	Prefer not to say	2.73%	4.4%
Age	18-24 years	0.46 %	0%
	25-34 years	15.28%	13.33%
	35-44 years	29.63%	24.44%
	45-54 years	23.61%	26.67%
	55-64 years	25.93%	28.89%
	65 and older	3.24%	5.56%
	Prefer not to say	1.85 %	1.11%

Example 1.
Demographics of high school and college survey participants.

RESULTS

Purposes of the AP Music Theory Program

Both high school and college survey participants ranked a list of seven possible purposes of the AP Music Theory curriculum and exam from most beneficial (ranking of 1) to least beneficial (ranking of 7). That list was inspired by information in various College Board materials about the aims of the AP program in general; it also includes items specific to music theory and ear training.⁸ The objectives that

8 See <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/start-grow-ap/discover-benefits> and <https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/exploreap/the-rewards>.

participants ranked were: aid students in the overall transition from high school to college (build general college skills), allow students to earn college credit and place out of introductory music theory and ear training courses, correspond with a typical first-semester music theory and/or ear training curriculum, expose students to a wide variety of musical concepts and skills, give students the opportunity to save on future college expenses, help students develop fluent fundamental musical skills, and help students stand out for college admissions. To eliminate the possibility of presentation order affecting the responses, each participant encountered this list of purposes in a different, random order.

Example 2 shows the correlation between the mean college and high school rankings for these seven purposes of the AP Music Theory course and exam. The strong positive correlation ($r = .95$) indicates that the ranked order of the seven purposes is almost identical across both participant groups, thereby reflecting overall agreement about the likely benefits of the AP program. The development of fluent fundamental skills was ranked as most beneficial, closely followed by exposing students to a wide variety of concepts. Corresponding with a first-semester college course, earning college credit, and aiding in the general transition to college were ranked in the middle. Standing out for college admissions and saving on future college expenses were ranked as least beneficial.

In addition to being ranked as the two most beneficial aspects of the AP program, the themes of fluency and exposure emerged when both participant groups were given the opportunity to share their thoughts in a free-response question. Comments from high school teachers centered around the challenges of a curriculum that they feel has “extremely difficult” and “overwhelming” content and pacing. According to one high school teacher:

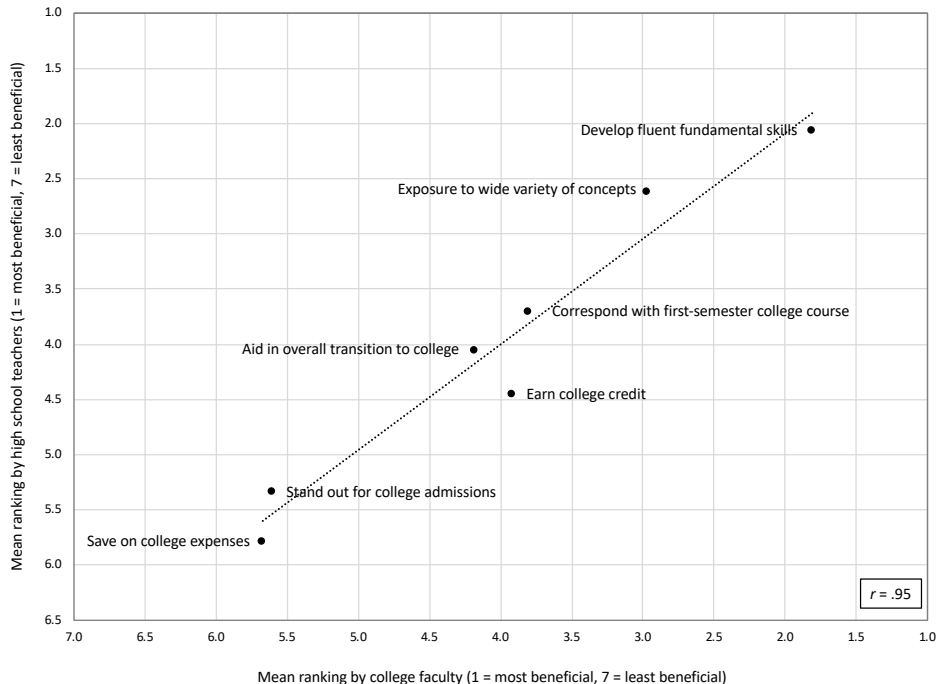
There is entirely too much material. The AP test covers what I did in Music Theory and Ear Training 1, 2, 3, and some form and analysis. This is nearly 20 hours of college credit. There is so much material that we don't have the opportunity to go deep on anything, we are stuck on the surface so we can get through all of the material in time. And we typically don't make it through all the material anyway. That is why some things aren't covered in my class. Not because I don't want to, but because I don't have time to cover it.

Although college faculty acknowledged that students who have taken AP Music Theory are generally better prepared for college than those who have not, they also commented on the “robust” nature of the AP program that often leaves students “woefully unprepared” for the college music theory and ear training curriculum. One college professor stated that “it seems the AP curriculum is too fast and tries to cover

too much material in a single year.” Two others provided more specific comments about the themes of exposure and mastery

In two decades of teaching theory and aural skills at the university level, I have not yet encountered a student who took AP theory and showed true mastery of the subject. The only advantage I have seen is that these students have exposure to the subject, which can help them during the first semester of study. Simply put, the AP class appears to lack the rigor associated with university level courses.

We have a significant number of students who have taken AP Theory and still place into Fundamentals. They have seen a lot of theory, but have very weak skills. They can tell me a little about secondary dominants, but can't tell me the notes in the G melodic minor scale. Most have no idea WHY things happen. They have learned some “rules” and can often crank out some part-writing, but they have very shallow understanding. . . [Students] need to have gained and retained transferable skills, not exposure.



Example 2.

Correlation between mean college and high school rankings for seven possible purposes of the AP Music Theory course and exam.

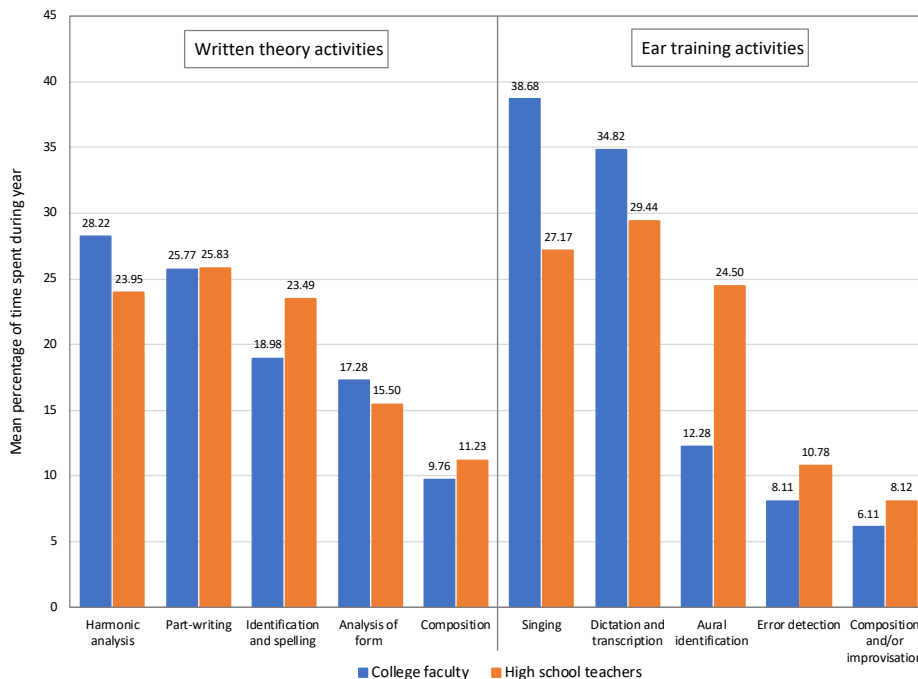
Comments like these provide one possible explanation for why only 46% of our college survey participants grant music theory or ear training credit to students who earn a minimum AP exam score of 3.⁹ In addition, of the college free-responses that mentioned a deficiency in the high school curriculum, 69% indicated that the lack of part-writing skills, a course objective included in most first-year college curricula, prevented students from placing out of one or two semesters.

Although both college and high school participants commented on the challenges of a broad curriculum, they still ranked exposure to a wide variety of topics as the second-most beneficial purpose of the AP curriculum. But a limited amount of instructional time and classes of diversely prepared students cause that outcome to conflict with the top-ranked benefit of acquiring fluent skills. Perhaps this philosophical contradiction begins to explain the overall content of the AP Music Theory curriculum, the degree of coordination between high school and college, and the decisions that individual institutions make about whether or not to accept AP credit and allow students to bypass a college music theory or ear training course. We will therefore focus on these two ideas of fluency and exposure as we present the survey results for specific aspects of the AP Music Theory and college curriculum.

General AP Music Theory Course and Exam Content

Prior to answering questions about specific concepts and skills, we invited participants to indicate the percentage of time they typically spend on five general categories of written theory activities and five general categories of ear training activities. College faculty estimated total time across their first- and second-year courses combined; high school teachers estimated across their full, one-year AP Music Theory course. As shown in Example 3, there is substantial agreement between college faculty and high school teachers on these activities. For written theory, both groups spend the most time (in relatively similar proportions) on harmonic analysis, part-writing, and identification/spelling. Analysis of form and composition tasks are then given less time. Similarly, both groups of teachers spend the most time on the ear training activities of singing and dictation/transcription, with tasks related to error detection and composition/improvisation receiving less attention.

9 Of the 165 written responses, Murphy and McConville (2017) reported that 56.36% accepted AP scores for theory or aural skills. It is also important to note that some states are required to give AP credit. For a list of state policies regarding AP credit, see <https://aphighered.collegeboard.org/setting-credit-placement-policy/state-credit-placement-policy>.



Example 3.

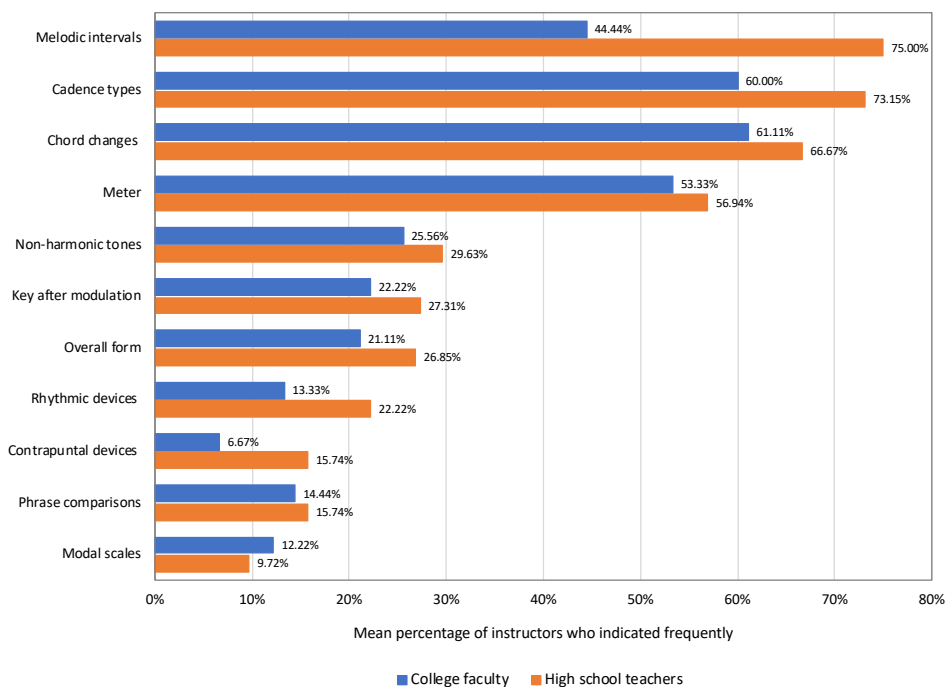
Time spent in college and high school on general categories of written theory and ear training activities.

The greatest disparity in the results for this question occurred for the activity of aural identification, where high school teachers spend significantly more time than college faculty. This is likely explained by the fact that the AP Music Theory exam contains many questions that require students to aurally identify various musical features in recorded examples.¹⁰ For instance, a question on the 2012 practice exam required that students recognize various components of a cello sonata by ear, including melodic intervals, chord changes, instrumental timbre, differences between phrases,

¹⁰ The exam format remains consistent year to year, although the content can change with the publication of a new Course and Exam Description (CED). Section IA is comprised of multiple-choice questions with an audio stimulus; Section IB is comprised of multiple-choice questions without an audio stimulus. Section II contains the Free Response (FR) questions, of which there are seven: FR 1–2 are melodic dictations, FR 3–4 are harmonic dictations, FR 5 realizes a figured bass, FR 6 is to provide 4-voice part-writing to a progression indicated by Roman numerals, and FR 7 requires completion of a bass line below a given melody.

cadence types, and harmonic/tonal function (sequence, tonic pedal, and extended or shortened phrase lengths).

Our awareness of this exam content led us to ask both groups of survey participants to indicate how often they have students listen to musical excerpts and identify various components by ear. The possible answers to this question were frequently, occasionally, or never. Example 4 displays the percentages of college faculty and high school teachers who selected frequently as their response. A significant finding is that a larger percentage of high school teachers responded frequently to all topics on this list, which again confirms that they spend more time on contextual listening activities than college faculty. Perhaps college faculty could integrate this activity into their aural skills classes in a more significant way in order to help students acquire a greater variety of ear training skills (beyond sight singing and dictation, which were reported to occupy 71.50% of time across the four semesters of ear training classes).



Example 4.

Percentages of college faculty and high school teachers who frequently have students listen to excerpts of music and identify components by ear.

Although high school teachers indicated that they engage students in these aural-identification activities more frequently than college faculty, they still responded never to some components that appear on the AP practice exam. For example, 15.28% of high school teachers reported that they never devote class time to listening for contrapuntal devices, which comprised 5.7% of the 2012 practice exam. Similarly, 10.65% never have students listen for rhythmic devices, which was even more significantly featured on the 2012 practice exam (at 17.1%). Finally, 9.72% never focus on listening for phrase comparisons, which represented 14.3% of 2012 practice exam questions.

A final question about time spent on general categories of activities was directed only to the high school teachers. Although most college faculty teach separate written theory and ear training classes, high school AP teachers must manage these different topics and skills within a single course. We therefore asked high school teachers to estimate the overall percentage of class time spent on written theory and ear training across the entire year. Results showed a mean of 61.85% for written theory activities and 38.15% for ear training activities. Not only is this an unequal balance of these activities, it is the inverse of the breakdown of questions on the AP exam, which is 33% written theory questions and 67% listening questions. Although this misalignment might be caused by teachers being unaware of this exam breakdown, some of our high school participants commented on the challenge of balancing time spent on different activities throughout the year. As one teacher described,

The program combines material that is often taught as two or even three separate courses in college, which means instructors are often forced to choose between placing greater emphasis on ear training and sight singing or written theory comprehension, as there is not enough time to make substantial growth in all areas if the incoming students are not relatively similar in their strengths coming in. As a result, I find that students almost always finish the course still lacking college-level proficiency in at least one area no matter how much effort they put into the class overall.

In addition, this result might be explained by the fact that it is difficult for teachers to create and assess all types of listening questions that are in the AP Course Framework and exam, thus supporting the need for more AP Music Theory-specific teaching resources that are geared toward high school ear training activities.¹¹

¹¹ The 2019 AP Music Theory Course and Exam Description (CED) includes more resources than previous years, such as descriptive unit guides, the AP Classroom, a sample question and exercise database, and an updated list of textbooks, materials, and websites. We include a more thorough discussion of this below.

Semester of Introduction in College vs. Time Spent in High School

After answering these general content questions, both groups of survey participants provided information about specific topics related to written theory and ear training. That list of topics was primarily generated from the 2012 AP Music Theory Course and Exam Description (CED), which was the current edition at the time of our survey creation and data collection.¹² The CED provides general information about the College Board and the AP Course Framework, as well as a detailed description of goals and topics within the curriculum, how the exams are created, and how to interpret scores and sub-scores. We also included a few additional topics that are likely to occur within the 2-year college curriculum. This allowed college faculty to populate all four semesters of their curriculum with different topics, while also providing information about times in which high school teachers might individually elect to expand the list of topics provided by the College Board.

In summer 2019, the College Board released a new CED, which provides a more detailed description of topics and includes an in-depth Unit Guide. Perhaps the most significant change is that the 2019 CED reorganizes the Course Framework into two essential components: course skills and course content. Within course skills, four essential tasks are identified within the “big ideas” of pitch, rhythm, form, and musical design: (1) analyze performed music, (2) analyze notated music, (3) convert between performed and notated music, and (4) complete music based on cues. These skills and big ideas are coded and weaved throughout the CED and Unit Guide, which estimates recommended amounts of time to devote to each unit alongside instructional strategies. As part of that reorganization, the list of topics in the 2019 CED is streamlined when compared with the 2012 CED, most notably in the exclusion of many small forms. Throughout the ensuing discussion of our survey results, we will comment on differences between the 2012 and 2019 CEDs when applicable.

On each of our surveys, the complete list of topics was divided into general groups of related ideas (rhythm, melody, harmony, form, etc.). College faculty indicated the course in which they first introduced and focused on each specific topic, meaning that they spend significant time on the concept in class and include it in a substantial way on assignments and exams. This provided information about the typical sequencing of topics across the 4-semester college curriculum, which is important when examining an AP curriculum that purports to give students the opportunity to test out of 1-2 semesters. In order to avoid any bias or suggestion of curriculum order, each

¹² [AP Music Theory 2012 CED](#) and [AP Music Theory 2012 Audio Prompts](#).

participant encountered the topics within each group in a different random order.

Since most are working within a single, full-year AP course, high school survey participants could not answer the same question about when topics are introduced across a 4-semester curriculum. Instead, these teachers indicated how many class sessions they typically spend on each concept from the same lists, with the order of topics again randomized for each participant. We acknowledge the challenge of this type of question since it is often hard to remember or estimate time spent on topics that could be naturally cumulative and likely appear in many different contexts across the academic year. High school classes also vary greatly between traditional daily meetings and various block schedules. Within these schedules, some classes are spread out over an academic year, while others are taught within a single semester.¹³ Despite these challenges, our survey results indicate clear differences in time spent on various topics, thereby offering interesting observations about the relationship between the attention they receive in the high school AP Music Theory class and when they are introduced within the college curriculum.

On the graphs below, colored bars show the percentage of high school teachers who spend different numbers of class sessions on each topic. In order to draw attention to the topics that were identified as occupying the most time, most graphs only show data for 6 or more class sessions (dark blue bars) and 3–5 class sessions (lighter blue bars). The missing portion of each stacked bar then represents the percentage of teachers who responded that they spend 1–2 class sessions, less than 1 class session, or no class sessions on that topic. If a majority of participants indicated those lesser amounts of time, those topics are shown in green bars on the graph (dark green for 1–2 classes and lighter green for less than 1 class). This highlights the topics in which high school students only receive a brief exposure.

The dots, lines, and boxed percentages on each graph (in gray and yellow) indicate how many college faculty first introduce and focus on the same topics in either their first-semester or second-semester course. For the purposes of our survey, Fundamentals was defined as a remedial course that students are only required to take if they did not achieve an adequate score on an internal diagnostic exam. Since only some schools offer and/or require such a course, we combined the results for Fundamentals and Theory 1 in order to reflect the topics that are likely placed in any

¹³ Within high school free-response comments, 18% were related to scheduling issues and the exam. For some, the block schedule is one semester. If they teach in the fall semester, they are finished in January, which leaves four months before the students test. For those that teach in the spring semester, they begin teaching in January and lose a full month of teaching due to the exam being scheduled in early May.

school's first-semester course. Since college faculty tended not to include ear training topics in the Fundamentals class, we report each of these topics as being introduced in Ear Training 1 or Ear Training 2. We focus on these first- and second-semester courses because the College Board indicates that a sufficient score on the AP Music Theory Exam could earn a student credit for either one or two semesters of the college curriculum.¹⁴ On each graph, topics are ordered from most to least likely to occur in the first-semester college class (displayed as a descending gray line).

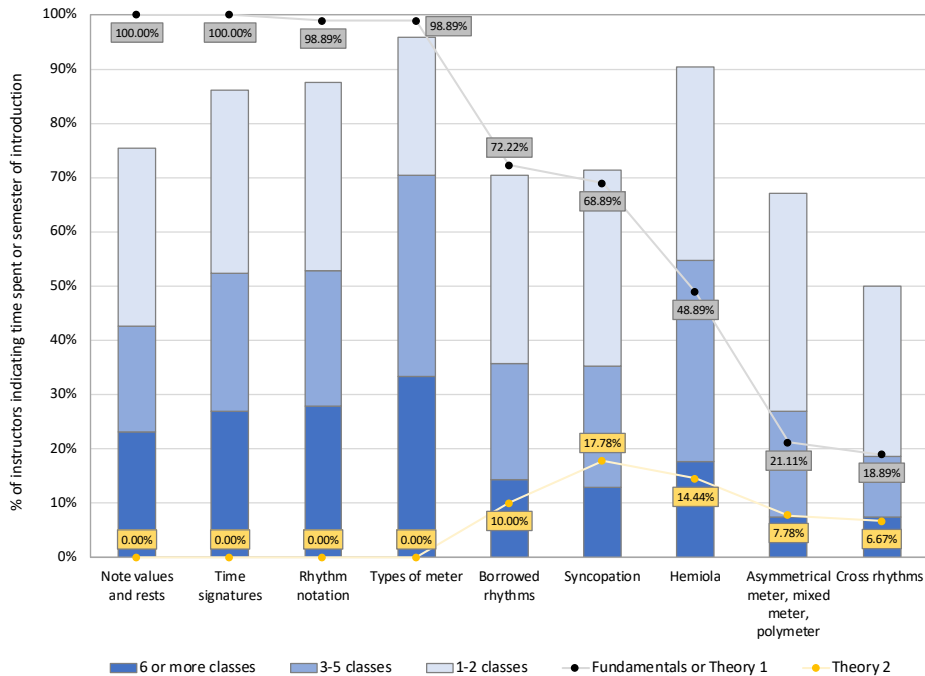
Rhythm and Meter

The first category contains topics related to rhythm and meter. As shown in Example 5, college faculty consistently place most of these topics in Fundamentals/Theory 1 (note values and rests, time signatures, rhythm notation, types of meter, borrowed rhythms, and syncopation). In contrast, hemiola is more often introduced in Theory 2. The only topics without at least 60% occurrence in either the first- or second-semester course are asymmetrical meter/mixed meter/polymeter and cross rhythms. The largest percentage of faculty instead introduce those topics in Theory 4 (46.67% and 33.33% respectively).

For most of these rhythm and meter topics, a relatively similar number of high school teachers indicated that they spend more than 6 classes, 3–5 classes, or 1–2 classes. For instance, some spend more than 10 classes on rudiments like note values and time signatures, while others spend less than one class. This is likely because some students enter the AP class already understanding these fundamentals and knowing how to read music. However, a majority of high school teachers indicated that their AP curriculum includes rhythm and meter topics that college faculty tend not to introduce in either Theory 1 or Theory 2, instead introducing it in Theory 4. For asymmetrical meter, mixed meter, and polymeter, 69.45% of high school teachers spend 1–2 class sessions or less than 1 class session on these topics. For cross rhythms, 69.91% spend similar amounts of time.

Participants responded in similar ways to a related list of rhythm and meter topics within ear training classes (see Example 6). At least 56.66% of college faculty put the first six topics in Ear Training 1, with borrowed rhythms and syncopation split between Ear Training 1 and Ear Training 2. As with the written theory topics, cross rhythms and asymmetrical meter/mixed meter/polymeter are placed outside the first year of the college ear training curriculum (with 53.33% and 46.67% placing them in Ear Training 4, respectively). The high school results for these ear training topics also

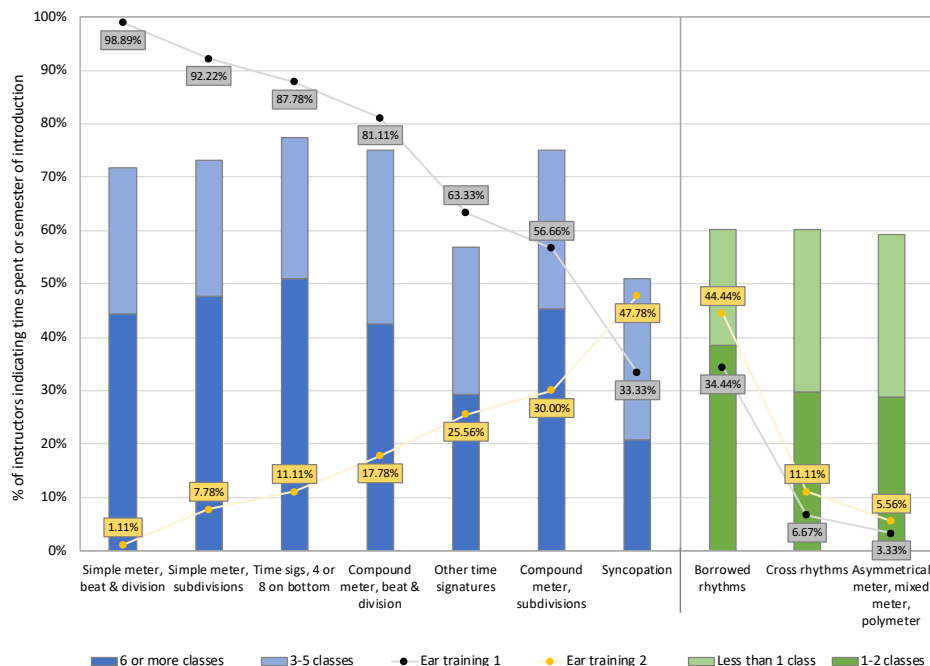
¹⁴ <https://aphighered.collegeboard.org/courses-exams/arts/music-theory>.



Example 5.

Rhythm and meter topics (written theory). Blue bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

correspond with the related written theory ones. Varying amounts of time are spent on the fundamentals that are likely introduced in the first-semester course, perhaps reflecting the incoming skills of the students in each high school AP class. Teachers again bring an exposure-approach to the rhythm topics that are likely introduced in the fourth semester of college, with approximately 60% only spending 1-2 classes or less than one class on these more advanced skills, as indicated by green bars on Example 6.



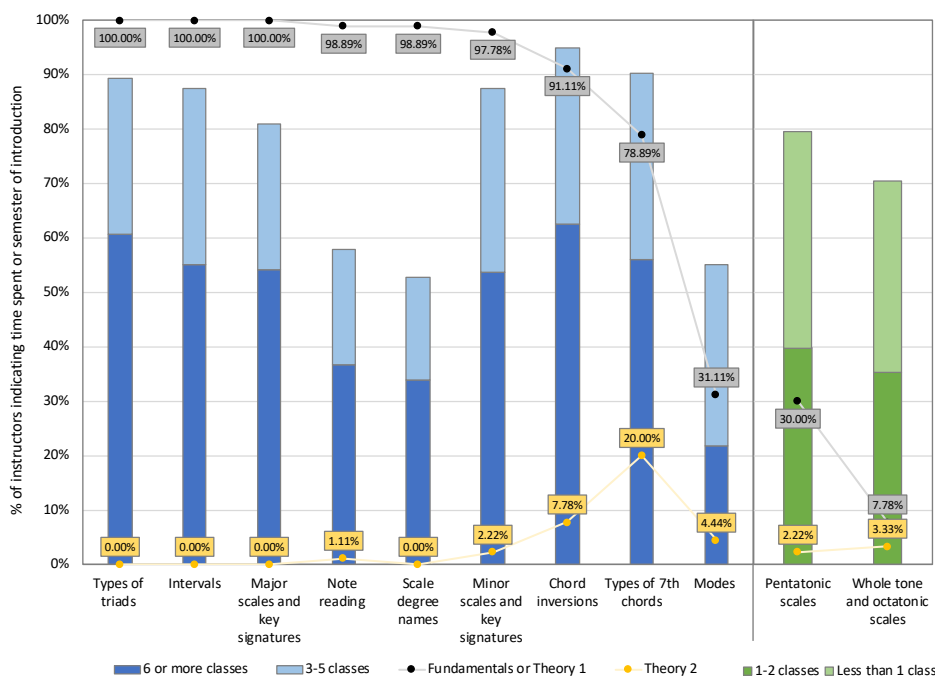
Example 6.

Rhythm and meter topics (ear training). Blue and green bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

For both written theory and ear training topics, the time spent on these advanced rhythmic concepts provides one example of a disjunction between the college curriculum, the AP Course Framework, and the AP practice exam. Cross rhythms and asymmetrical meter/mixed meter/polymeter appear in the 2012 CED, thus explaining their incidence in the classroom. But since they do not appear on the AP practice exam, any time spent in class is disproportionate to its occurrence on the exam and to preparation for a first- or second-semester college course. In the 2019 CED, asymmetrical and mixed meters appear in skill 1 (analyzing performed music) and cross rhythms appear in skill 3 (dictation-like exercises); polymeter is excluded.

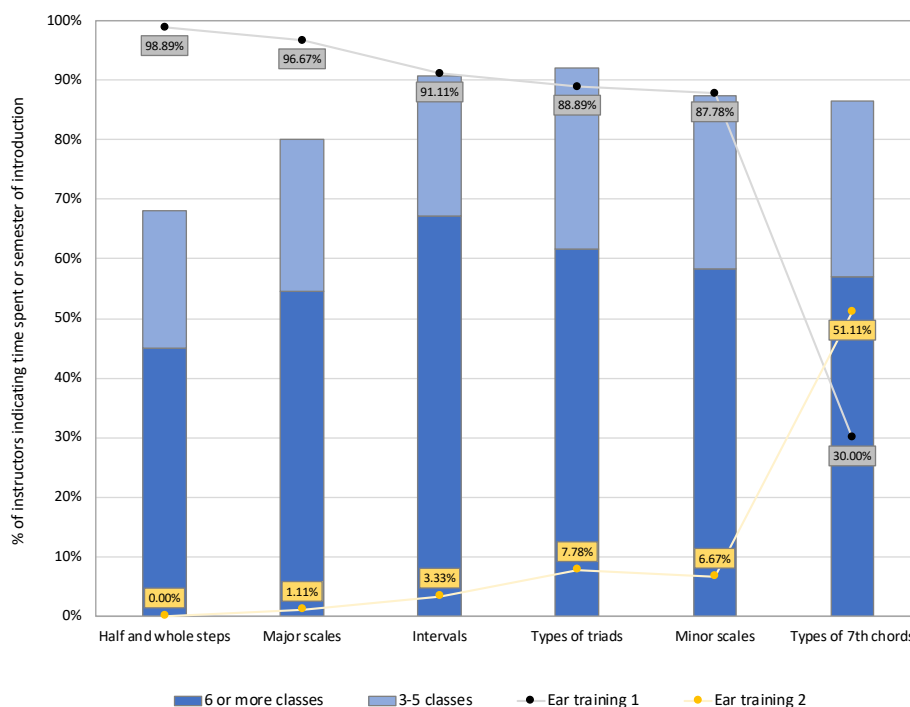
Pitch Fundamentals

Similar results emerged for the written theory and ear training topics that are related to pitch fundamentals. As shown in Example 7 and Example 8, 87–100% of college faculty place whole and half steps, scales, key signatures, intervals, triads, note reading, scale degree names, and chord inversions in Fundamentals/Theory 1 and Ear Training 1. A slightly lower percentage of faculty introduce types of seventh chords in the first semester (78.89% for written theory and 51.11% for ear training), but the fact that 20% and 30%, respectively, place seventh chords in the second semester means that the concept still occurs in the first year of the college music theory and ear training curriculum. Far fewer college faculty introduce modes, pentatonic scales, and whole tone/octatonic scales in either Theory 1 or Theory 2, with those topics more commonly included in Theory 4 (46.67%, 46.67% and 63.33%, respectively).



Example 7.

Pitch fundamentals topics (written theory). Blue and green bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.



Example 8.

Pitch fundamentals topics (ear training). Blue bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

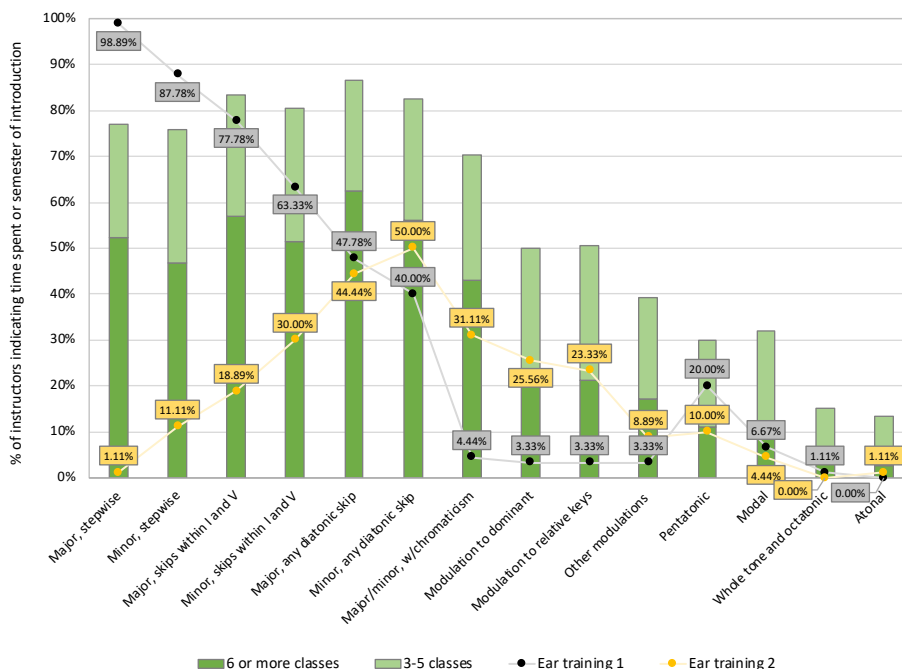
There is a strong alignment between semester of college introduction and high school time spent for most of these pitch fundamentals topics. At least 81% of high school teachers spend at least 3–5 class sessions on the written theory topics of major scales and key signatures, intervals, types of triads, minor scales and key signatures, chord inversions, and types of seventh chords. Similarly, at least 80% of high school teachers spend at least 3–5 classes sessions on the ear training topics of major scales, intervals, triads, minor scales, and seventh chords. Fewer teachers spend that much time on note reading and scale degree names (for written theory) and half/whole steps (for ear training), but that could be because students enter class already possessing those skills. A majority of high school teachers (55.09%) spend at least 3 class sessions on modes (even though it is typically not introduced until Theory 4), but an even larger majority spend limited amounts of time on the other Theory

4 topics of pentatonic scales and whole tone/octatonic scales (72.68% and 73.62% respectively). This is another example of how high school teachers sometimes provide a brief exposure to topics that college music majors are unlikely to encounter in the first-year music theory curriculum.

Melody

Example 9 reports the results for melodic ear training topics. In the college results, the gray and yellow lines cross when the melodies begin to include any type of diatonic skip. This suggests that first-semester college ear training is primarily centered on major and minor melodies that are stepwise or that only have skips from the tonic and dominant chords, while the second semester focuses on melodies that are increasingly disjunct and include skips from other diatonic chords. Although the highest incidence of 6 or more classes (dark blue bars) occurs for these early ear training topics, high school teachers also spend substantial time on topics that are more likely introduced in the second-year curriculum. For instance, only 31% of college faculty introduce melodic chromaticism in Ear Training 2 and an even smaller percentage include modulation to the dominant or relative key in that class (25.56% and 23.33% respectively). These topics are instead typically introduced in Ear Training 3, with modulation to other keys and atonal melodies saved for Ear Training 4 (if included in the college ear training curriculum at all). The AP curriculum is moderately aligned with these results. The 2012 CED primarily includes ear training melodies in major or minor keys with any diatonic skips and chromaticism. In the Free Response (FR) section, modulation is not included in sight-singing (FR1 and FR2) or in the melodic dictation parts of the exam (FR3 and FR4).

The results for melodies that are chromatic, modulating, pentatonic, modal, whole tone, and octatonic reflect pronounced dissimilarities between the college curriculum, the AP curriculum, and time spent in the high school AP class. For written theory, these topics are almost never introduced in Fundamentals/Theory 1 and only occasionally in Theory 2 (see Example 7). Instead, 46–63% of college faculty introduce modes, pentatonic scales, and whole tone/octatonic scales in Theory 4. Similarly, ear training activities that include these topics are rarely included in the first-year college curriculum. Chromatic and modulating melodies tend to occur in Ear Training 3 (51–58% of faculty) and melodies based on modal, pentatonic, whole tone, and octatonic pitch collections are most often introduced in Ear Training 4 (44–72%).



Example 9.

Melody topics (ear training). Blue and green bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

In contrast to these college results, at least 70% (and often nearly 100%) of high school teachers include all of these more advanced ear training topics in their AP classes. The only exception is atonal melodies (48%), but there are still a substantial number of teachers devoting class time to that topic. And within that devoted class time, the majority of high school teachers spend 1–2 class sessions or less than 1 class session on ear training activities related to pentatonic, modal, whole tone, octatonic, and atonal melodies (see green bars on Example 9). All of this indicates an exposure-approach that is unlikely to lead to the development of reliable skills, as well as a large distribution of class time on topics that play an extraordinarily small part (if any) in the first-year college curriculum. Some of this time spent could be explained by the inclusion of modes and pentatonic scales in the 2012 CED and exam. Similarly, the 2019 CED includes pentatonic scales in analyzing performed and notated music (skills

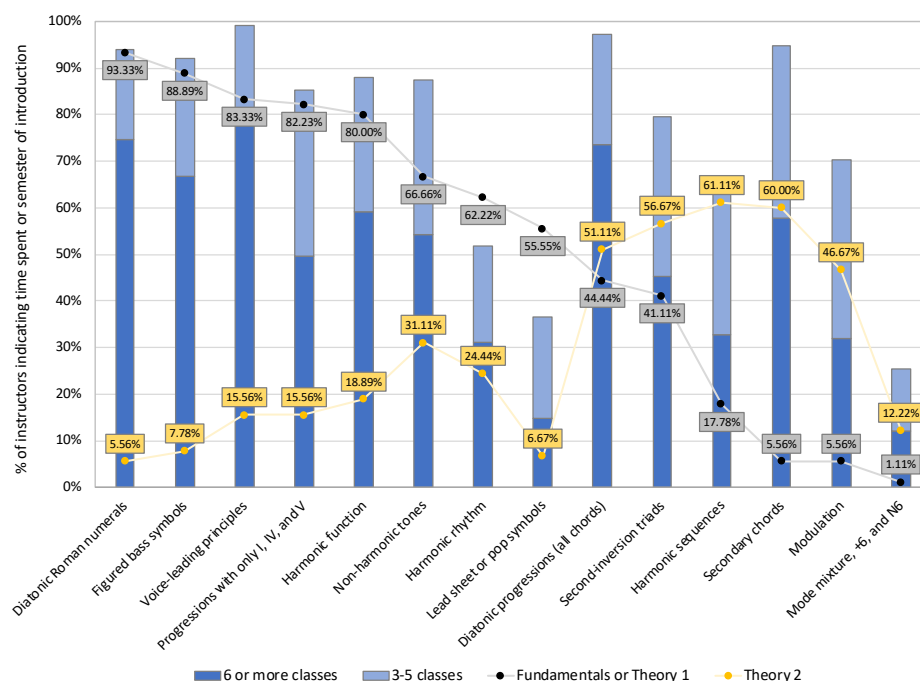
1 and 2), whole tone scales in performed music (skill 1), and modes in performed music and dictation exercises (skills 1 and 3). Octatonic scales and atonal melodies do not appear in either CED or on the currently available sections of the practice exam.

Harmony

Although the majority of topics related to rhythm/meter and pitch fundamentals were consistently placed in the first semester of the college curriculum, the list of harmony topics shows a clear division between the first and second semesters (indicated by the crossing gray and yellow lines on Examples 10 and 11). With the exception of harmonic sequences, at least 40% of college faculty place all of the diatonic written theory topics in Fundamentals/Theory 1. Within that context, progressions with all possible diatonic chords and second-inversion chords are split relatively evenly between Fundamentals/Theory 1 and Theory 2.¹⁵ Approximately 60% of college faculty introduce harmonic sequences and secondary chords in Theory 2 (with 17% and 34% placing those concepts in Theory 3, respectively), but the timing of these topics is likely dependent on whether or not an institution has a Fundamentals class. Those that do not offer that course show a higher incidence of secondary chords in Theory 3. A smaller number of college faculty introduce modulation in Theory 2 (46.67%), with the same percentage instead introducing that topic for Theory 3. Finally, it is very unlikely that mode mixture, augmented sixth chords, and Neapolitan chords are introduced during the first two semesters of the college curriculum. Instead, 78.89% of college faculty introduce those chromatic chords in Theory 3.

As shown with the blue bars in Example 10, high school teachers spend substantial amounts of time on the diatonic harmony topics that are likely to occur in the first-semester college music theory course. This points to a strong alignment between college and high school curricula. However, they also spend time on topics that are more commonly introduced in Theory 2 or Theory 3. Of particular interest are secondary chords and modulation, where developing proficiency can be involved and challenging. Nearly all of the high school survey participants (94.91%) indicated that they spend substantial time on secondary chords (either 3–5 classes or more than 6 classes). Similarly, 70% responded that they spend at least 3 classes on modulation.

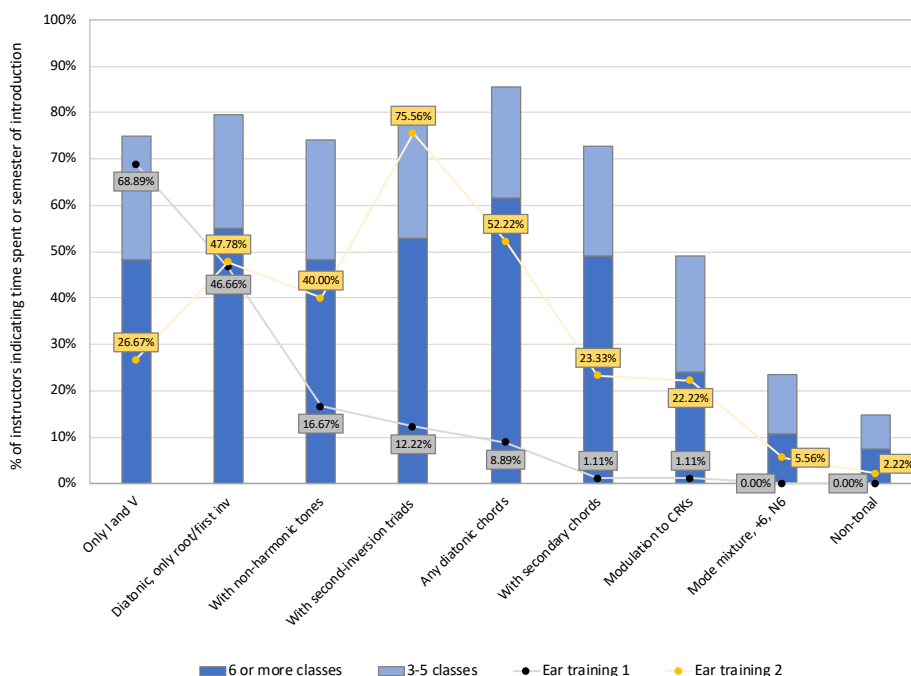
¹⁵ Although some readers might prefer a more nuanced discussion of the functional meaning of “second-inversion triad,” we used this term because of its presence in the CED; the category and its place in the curriculum do not affect the results reported here.



Example 10.

Harmony topics (written theory). Blue bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

Similar patterns emerged when participants indicated semester of introduction in college and high school time spent on harmony topics within the ear training curriculum (see Example 11). All diatonic topics are placed in the first or second semester by at least 50% of college faculty, with non-harmonic tones evenly split between the first two semesters and progressions with second-inversion triads and any chord/inversion more frequently introduced in Ear Training 2. Although the timing of these diatonic topics aligns well with the written theory results, chromatic topics that are often introduced in Theory 2 instead tend to be included in Ear Training 3 (at least 70% for progressions with secondary chords, modulation, other chromatic chords). This lag is partially explained by the increased difficulty of understanding, identifying, and notating these chords and modulations. In addition, listening skills needed for dictation and singing take longer to develop than identification skills, which requires that teachers address chromatic topics in



Example 11.

Harmony topics (ear training). Blue bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

the second-year ear training curriculum.¹⁶

Based on these results, an AP curriculum that was aligned with the 2-year college curriculum would not include these chromatic ear training topics. However, secondary chords appear with some regularity in both the 2012 and 2019 CED and practice exam, most notably in multiple-choice questions without an aural stimulus and Free

¹⁶ The College Board recognizes the following in the 2019 CED: “Identifying instances of tonicization in performed music requires them to engage in many contextual listening opportunities to hear and distinguish a tonicized chord from other diatonic chords. Regarding notated music, identifying instances of tonicization requires them to distinguish pitches with accidentals from expected pitches within a given key. Once they can identify instances of tonicization, students must be able to describe the function of the tonicization (e.g., secondary dominant, and secondary leading tone), which requires them to have a deep understanding of key relationships and harmonic relationships of diatonic chords in a variety of keys” (2019, 149). On the 2019 CED, secondary chords and functions only occur in analyzing notated music and completing a composition exercise based on cues (skills 2 and 4), and FR 4, harmonic dictation. For additional insights about the lag between written theory and ear training, see Jones and Bergee (2008).

Response questions (FR4, FR6, and FR7). Given that inclusion, 72.69% of high school AP teachers devote at least 3 classes to ear training activities involving secondary chords (with that total divided fairly evening between 3–5 classes, 6–10 classes, and more than 10 classes). The 2019 Unit Guide restructures secondary chords and functions within the curriculum and recommends that teachers devote 10–12 class sessions to develop the ability to recognize tonicizations and practice part writing with secondary dominants and secondary leading tone chords. Compared to these new recommendations, our survey results indicate that only 24.54% of high school teachers are currently spending that much time on that topic, with another 70.37% spending 6–10 or 3–5 classes.

The time spent on modulation is also explained by its inclusion in the CED and AP practice exam. On the 2012 practice exam, modulation occurs in two multiple-choice questions (one with an aural stimulus and one without). Free Response 7 also features a solution in which a modulation is viable. Although modulation is omitted from ear training in 2019, it can appear in skill 4, completing a composition based on cues, such as that practiced for FR7. High school teachers respond to this inclusion in a variety of ways. Only 24.08% spend at least 6 classes on this challenging ear training topic, with another 64.35% spending 3–5, 1–2, or less than one session. Perhaps that limited time reflects a teacher's awareness that modulation has a minimal presence on the exam. Students might therefore be able to earn a satisfactory exam score without being proficient at this skill. However, its inclusion in the CED and the time spent in class reflects a misalignment with the college curriculum.

An even more pronounced misalignment occurs for ear training activities that involve harmonic progressions with mode mixture, augmented sixth chords, and the Neapolitan chord. The 2012 practice exam had one question related to mode mixture, but that only referred to a parallel key relationship between phrases and not to progressions with borrowed chords. Neither the 2012 or 2019 CED includes these topics. But 23.61% of our high school survey participants indicated that they spend at least 3 classes sessions on ear training activities with these chromatic chords, with another 31.95% briefly exposing students to these skills in either 1–2 classes or less than one class session. This is a significant amount of cumulative time spent on topics which are not introduced in the first-year college ear training classes or included on the AP exam. In addition, although briefly mentioning these topics exposes high school students to concepts and skills that they might eventually encounter as college music majors, it does not allow for full understanding or mastery. It instead borrows from time that could potentially be spent on developing fluency with a shorter list of

skills that better correspond with both the AP Music Theory curriculum and the first-year college curriculum.

Form and Counterpoint

Example 12 shows the survey results for written theory topics related to form and counterpoint. Of the topics on this list, only cadence types, species counterpoint, and phrase combinations are introduced in the first two semesters of written theory by a majority of college survey participants. All other topics, which mostly center are larger-scale forms, are rarely introduced in Fundamentals/Theory 1 and only occasionally in Theory 2. Instead, these topics are typically introduced in Theory 3, Theory 4, or an upper-level form class. Similarly, questions about large-scale form (ternary, rondo, theme and variation, sonata-allegro, etc.) tend not to appear on the AP exam.¹⁷ We therefore see a disconnect between the semester in which these topics are introduced in college and time spent in the AP class, with 57-71% of high school teachers indicating that they spend 1-2 classes or less than 1 class on each of these topics (see green bars on Example 12). This represents a brief exposure to a large number of topics that students are unlikely to encounter until their second year as a college music major.

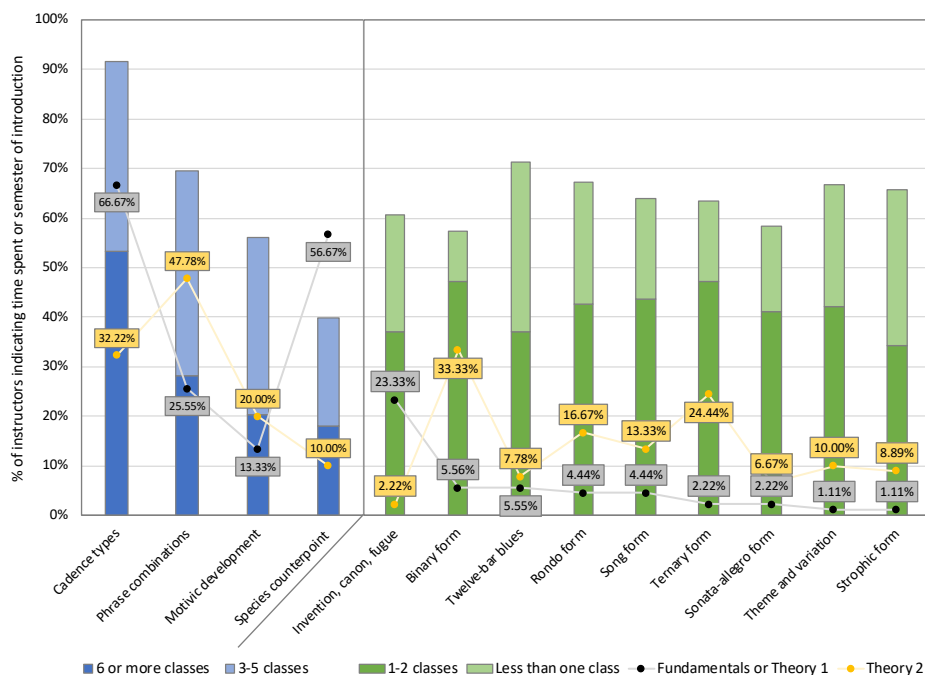
The results related to species counterpoint deserve particular attention here. Within the AP curriculum, mention of counterpoint generally refers to eighteenth-century conventions as applied to soprano-bass counterpoint. It is possible that the 39.82% of high school survey participants who indicated spending at least 3 classes sessions on species counterpoint responded based on that more general interpretation. Similarly, of the 54.44% of college faculty who responded that they introduce species counterpoint in their first-semester course, some could have been thinking specifically about species (or strict) counterpoint and others about counterpoint as it refers to soprano-bass voice leading (as in the AP CED). With either interpretation, our survey results support a shift in college curriculum that now incorporates counterpoint throughout the 2-year college curriculum, as opposed to a specialized upper-level class.¹⁸ Marvin (2012, 258) explains this transition as a product of a more

¹⁷ Binary form is mentioned in the 2012 CED (p. 12) and appears on one multiple-choice question without an aural stimulus (section IB) on the practice exam; binary form is omitted in the new 2019 CED. Ternary, sonata, and theme and variation form are mentioned in the 2012 CED (p. 12) but do not occur in the practice exam. The 2019 CED only includes 12-bar blues and theme and variation.

¹⁸ Murphy and McConville's results show that in 2017, 43.72% incorporated counterpoint within the core while only 21.89% had a separate class (2017, 206).

specialized approach to music theory pedagogy, noting that “nearly half of the schools surveyed reported a move toward engagement with music repertoire and somewhat less emphasis upon figured bass and part-writing. These writing skills, along with an introduction to species counterpoint, remain critical foundational elements for core theory training.” As evidenced in recent pedagogical approaches and textbooks, many college music theory faculty now approach harmonic motion from a more linear perspective. As follows, it is becoming more common to introduce two-voice part writing before SATB textures, thereby giving emphasis to either the general use of the term counterpoint or its more strict species approach (257).

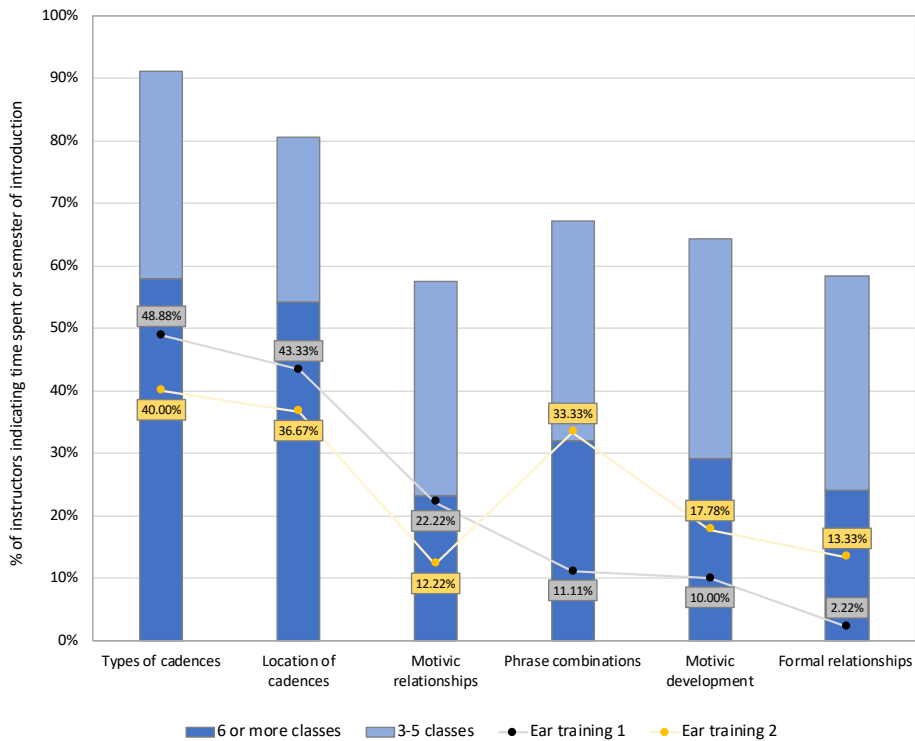
Rather than focusing on the analysis of small- and large-scale forms, the ear training topics related to form and counterpoint center on students’ ability to aurally identify cadences, motivic relationships, phrase combinations, motivic development, and overall formal relationships. With the exception of the types and locations of



Example 12.

Form and counterpoint topics (written theory). Blue and green bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

cadences, none of these topics are introduced in Ear Training 1 or 2 by a majority of college faculty. This is likely explained by the fact that college faculty incorporate contextual listening tasks far less frequently than high school AP teachers (see discussion of Example 4). But even with an awareness of the frequency and difficulty of these questions on the AP exam, some high school teachers spend a limited amount of time working on these aural identification tasks (57–64% spend 3–5, 1–2, or less than 1 class session).



Example 13.

Form and counterpoint topics (ear training). Blue bars indicate time spent in high school; gray and yellow percentages indicate semester of introduction in college.

Summary of Results for Specific Topics

In order to summarize the detailed results outlined above, the specific theory and ear training topics were sorted into three categories based on time spent in high school: topics on which teachers tend the greatest amount of time (6 or more classes), topics on which teachers tend to spend the least amount of time (2 or fewer classes), and topics on which teachers are relatively evenly split between spending 6 or more, 3–5, and 2 or fewer classes. Within each of those categories, topics are grouped based on the semester in which they are introduced by the largest percentage of college faculty (most often greater than 50% for an individual class or greater than 30% each across two different classes). This organization provides an overall assessment of the degree of alignment between the AP Music Theory program (as indicated by time spent) and the college curriculum.

The first category includes the written theory and ear training topics that are given the most time by our high school survey participants, with at least 45% of high school teachers spending 6 or more class sessions on each topic (see Example 14). This amount of time aligns well with the college curriculum, where close to 100% of college survey participants reported that almost all of these topics are introduced in either their first- or second-semester course. The two exceptions are secondary dominants (for written theory) and progressions with any diatonic chords and inversions (for ear training). Although the introduction of these topics is split across the second and third semesters, high school teachers likely grant them significant time because of their difficulty and their presence in the AP CED and exam. But even with those exceptions, these results suggest that the list of topics in Example 14 could encompass a majority of the AP curriculum, thus allowing high school teachers to focus on developing fluent fundamental skills and preparing students for the concepts that they will certainly encounter in their first semester (or at least first year) of college-level music theory and ear training.

In contrast to the topics in Example 14, those in Example 15 represent the exposure- approach within the AP curriculum. These are the written topics in which high school teachers spend the least amount of time, with at least 50% spending two or fewer classes for the written theory topics and at least 30% spending the same limited amount of time for those on the ear training list.¹⁹ Very few of these topics tend to be introduced in the first- and second-semester college courses. Of those that

¹⁹ The percentage of teachers is lower for ear training topics because some teachers do not include a few of these topics in their curriculum at all (e.g., atonal melodies and non-tonal harmonic progressions). This results in a lower proportion of total teachers that report any time spent.

are introduced, the limited time spent on note values and rests is likely explained by the fact that many high school students enter the AP class already knowing how to read music. Teachers therefore do not need to devote multiple class periods to helping students develop that skill. However, all other skills in Example 15 represent a lack of alignment between time spent in high school and semester of introduction in college. Borrowed rhythms, syncopated rhythms, and lead sheet/pop symbols tend to be introduced in the first year, but are given little attention in high school. All other topics listed in Example 15 more frequently occur in the third and fourth semesters, in an upper-level theory class, or not in the two-year college curriculum at all.

	WRITTEN THEORY	EAR TRAINING
First semester	- Major scales and key signatures - Intervals - Types of triads - Minor scales and key signatures - Diatonic Roman numerals - Chord inversions - Figured bass symbols - Voice-leading principles - Progressions with only I, IV, and V - Harmonic function - Types of seventh chords	- Stepwise major melodies - Major scales - Intervals - Types of triads - Minor scales - Time signatures with 4 or 8 on bottom - Major melodies containing skips within I and V
First or second semester	- Cadence types - Non-harmonic tones - Harmonic progressions with any diatonic chords and inversions - Second-inversion triads	- Minor melodies containing skips within I and V - Types of cadences - Major melodies with any diatonic skips - Diatonic progressions with only root position and first-inversion chord - Location of cadences - Minor melodies with any diatonic skips - Types of seventh chords
Second semester	None	Harmonic progressions with second-inversion triads
Third semester	Secondary chords	Harmonic progressions with any diatonic chords and inversions

Example 14.

Written theory and ear training topics in which at least 45% of high school teachers spend 6 or more class sessions, sorted by most frequent semester of introduction in college.

	WRITTEN THEORY	EAR TRAINING
First semester	• Note value and rests • Borrowed rhythms • Syncopation • Lead sheet or pop symbols	• None
First or second semester	• None	• Borrowed rhythms • Syncopated rhythms
Second or third semester	• Binary form	• None
Third semester	• Rondo form • Song form • Ternary form • Sonata-allegro form • Theme and variation	• Melodies that modulate to the dominant • Melodies that modulate to the relative major or minor • Melodies that modulate to keys other than the dominant and relative minor • Harmonic progressions with modulation to closely-related keys • Harmonic progressions with mode mixture, +6, and N6
Fourth semester	• Pentatonic scales • Asymmetrical meter, mixed meter, and/or polymeter • Cross rhythms • Whole tone and octatonic scales	• Pentatonic melodies • Cross rhythms • Modal melodies • Asymmetrical meter, mixed meter, and/or polymeter • Whole tone and octatonic melodies • Non-tonal harmonic progressions • Atonal melodies
Fourth semester or upper-level course	• Invention, canon, and fugue	• None
None	• Twelve-bar blues • Strophic form	• Motivic relationships • Formal relationships

Example 15.

Written theory topics in which at least 50% of high school teachers spend 2 or fewer class sessions and ear training topics in which at least 30% spend 2 or fewer class sessions, sorted by most frequent semester of introduction in college.

High school teachers might include the topics in Example 15 in their AP Music Theory curriculum as a way of providing students with a general awareness of a wide variety of concepts. Their presence in the high school curriculum could also reflect the personal interests of individual teachers or be explained by their inclusion

in the college theory textbooks that high school teachers often adopt for their AP courses.²⁰ However, these topics tend not to occur on the AP Music Theory exam or in the first-year college curriculum. In addition, although a brief exposure of 2 or fewer classes on any single topic does not provide sufficient time for the development of deep understanding or fluent skills, the combined time spent on these brief exposures across an entire curriculum produces a substantial number of class sessions. It might therefore be more effective for high school teachers to omit these topics from their AP class, which would immediately grant them more time to teach the topics in Example 14 and prepare students for both the AP exam and the college-level courses. An increased availability of AP Music Theory-specific textbooks and pedagogical resources could also alleviate the temptation for high school teachers to expand an already full curriculum from the College Board.²¹

Our final category includes topics in which high school teachers spend varied amounts of time, with relatively similar percentages devoting 6 or more, 3–5, and 2 or fewer class sessions (see Example 16). We also see different semesters of introduction for these topics within the college curriculum. Those that are introduced in the first semester represent fundamental aspects of music reading, singing, and dictation. As mentioned previously, less time spent on some of these topics in high school could be a product of a student population that enters the AP class having already acquired these skills. However, some teachers might have limited time for these skills because they are balancing time spent on an expansive curriculum that includes the more advanced topics listed in Example 15. This requires them to move too quickly away from fundamentals in order to get to the more complex topics of chromaticism, modulation, and form. Eliminating time spent on the briefly mentioned topics in Example 15, as well as those from Example 16 that are introduced in the second year of college, might alleviate the concerns that many of our high school participants expressed about struggling to find sufficient time for ear training as compared to the written theory concepts. Instead, time spent on the first-semester topics in Example 16 would join those in Example 14 (where teachers spend at least 6 class sessions), thereby better preparing students for the first-semester college curriculum or allowing them to receive credit for that course based on a sufficient AP exam score.

20 For a list of recommended texts, see <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-music-theory/course-audit>.

21 For instance, there is an “AP Edition” of *The Musician’s Guide to Theory and Analysis* (Clendinning and Marvin, 2016) and *The Musician’s Guide to Aural Skills* (Murphy, Phillips, Marvin, and Clendinning, 2016).

	WRITTEN THEORY	EAR TRAINING
First semester	• Time signatures • Clef reading • Scale degree names • Rhythm notation • Types of meter • Harmonic rhythm • Species counterpoint • Hemiola	• Simple meter, beat and division only • Half and whole steps • Simple meter, with beat subdivisions • Stepwise minor melodies • Compound meter, beat and division only • Harmonic progressions with only I and V chords • Time signatures with something other than 4 and 8 on bottom
First or second semester	• None	• Compound meter, with beat subdivisions
Second semester	• Phrase combinations (period, sentence, etc.) • Harmonic sequences	• Harmonic progressions with non-harmonic tones • Phrase combinations (period, sentence, etc.)
Second or third semester	• Modulation	• Major and minor melodies with chromaticism
Third semester	• Motivic development (inversion, augmentation, etc.) • Mode mixture, +6, and N⁶	• Harmonic progressions with secondary chords
Fourth semester	• Modes	• None
None	• None	• Motivic development

Example 16.

Written theory and ear training topics in a relatively similar percentage of high school teachers spend 6 or more, 3–5, and 2 or fewer class sessions, sorted by most frequent semester of introduction in college.

Time Spent Practicing for the AP Music Theory Exam

It is accepted within the AP Music Theory community that test preparations require ample amounts of time and strategy. The College Board provides extensive on-line curricular resources and sample exams, which high school teachers use to familiarize themselves with exam content, exam format, course framework, and assessments. In addition, training provided by AP consultants (sponsored by the College Board and Educational Testing Service) helps teachers learn grading rubrics and practice sample lesson plans.²² A participant in a previously-published study shared an opinion about how knowledge of the AP grading rubric informed their approach to teaching melodic dictation:

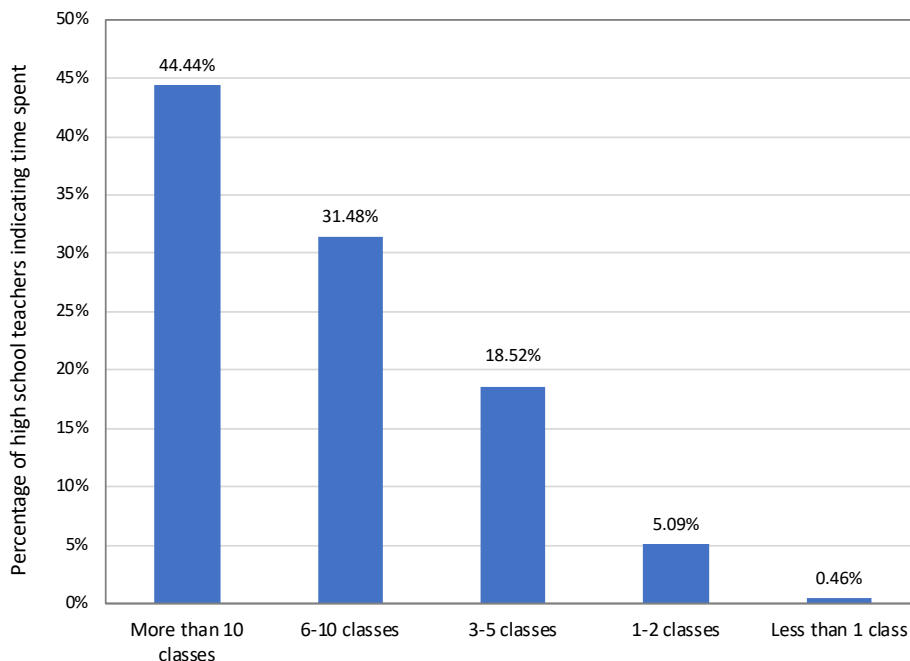
²² There are also many on-line AP teacher communities in which teachers from both high school and college share resources.

The primary method [for scoring] is that you get a point for every half measure of the dictation you get correct. We also know that every AP melodic dictation ends on tonic, and it's usually some sort of sustained pitch. So, get the last measure, get the first measure, and then you get your bonus point for anything else you might get right, and then you've got 5 out of the 9 points that are available to you on the exam... I tell especially my weaker students not to kill themselves on measures 2 and 3—get what you can from that—but you have to get all of measures 1 and 3 so really focus on that (Paney and Buonviri 2014, 407).

Based on our awareness of such strategies, as well as our knowledge that high school AP teachers feel responsible for teaching both concepts and standardized test preparation, we asked those survey participants to indicate how much time they typically spend practicing for the AP exam. As shown in Example 17, 75.92% of teachers spend 6 or more classes preparing for the exam, with close to 45% dedicating 10 or more. Preparing for the exam thus occupies a significant amount of class time within a rigorous overall course framework. For many, this length of time detracts from their teaching goals. One high school teacher described that “teaching this course requires, unfortunately, teachers to spend a significant portion of time ‘teaching to the test,’ which disallows adequate time for some of the higher order musical skills we’d like to provide students.” Another highlighted the tension between balancing curricular goals with training students to achieve a satisfactory AP exam score:

The AP Music Theory course is well organized by the College Board, and the rigor of the class is fair and appreciated. However, in the end, like other AP courses, we are teaching to the test. This presents an immense challenge to the teacher to simultaneously help the students be successful on the test and develop their lifelong love of learning music.

Results of studies from other disciplines acknowledge similar issues, with one commenting that “the fast pace of AP courses, due in large measure to the focus on test preparation, may not serve students as well as courses that progress at a more moderate pace, focusing on topics in greater depth and detail” (Sadler and Tai, 2007, 5).



Example 17.
Percentage of high school teachers indicating different amounts
of time spent practicing for the AP exam.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals the degree of alignment between the two-year core music theory/ear training curriculum and the AP Music Theory program. Possible benefits of this survey approach are: (1) increased awareness of both college and high school curricula; (2) examination of curricular priorities to determine prevalent teaching trends across college, high school, and AP program; (3) comparisons of pedagogical approaches across topics; and (4) consideration of how approaches based on fluency and/or exposure impact the preparation of college-bound music students.

Within the context of these benefits, our results indicate a strong consensus about when certain topics are introduced within the college music theory and ear training curriculum. Likewise, there is good alignment between most first-year topics and time

spent in high school. However, the 2012 and 2019 CEDs include topics that fall outside the first-year college curriculum. This has the potential to overload teachers with unnecessary material. In addition, despite the fact that teachers must have their AP syllabi approved through a Course Audit that is reviewed by a consultant recommended by the College Board and Educational Testing Service, high school teachers indicate that they still devote considerable amounts of time on more advanced topics that do not appear in either the first-year college courses or the AP CED. This suggests that, even while expressing concern about the magnitude of the program, AP Music Theory teachers tend toward exposing students to a breadth of concepts rather than providing depth with a more limited set of topics that are congruent with the AP CED and the first-year college curriculum.

Results also highlight differences in course scheduling between high school and college. Of greatest significance is the fact that most universities divide the 2-year core sequence into separate classes for written theory and aural skills. Overall, nearly 56% of the high school teachers who provided free-response comments alluded to feeling burdened with essentially preparing students for two classes within a one-year curriculum that extends beyond what most college faculty report as being first-semester (or even first-year) material. According to one high school participant:

I had ear training and written theory as two classes. I am expected to do both in one period. I hate that I can't spend more time on ear training. The written theory is so much to teach and I feel as though the aural theory isn't addressed enough.

A college participant also acknowledged this challenge:

As an AP Theory Reader, I have heard over and over from my high school counterparts that they feel overwhelmed trying to cover the AP curriculum as it stands (most of them must cover it in a single year). Refining the curriculum to basic diatonic harmony would go a long way to easing the burden of our already over-taxed high school colleagues.

Based on our survey results and comments such as these, a more streamlined approach to the AP Music Theory CED could be taken to avoid overwhelming high school teachers with topics that lie outside the first-year college curriculum or do not appear on the exam. This would allow more time to balance written theory and ear training activities, as well as help students develop fluent fundamental musical skills. In addition, results showed that high school teachers are spending small amounts of time on a variety of topics that are not included in the AP CED. As such, it would be to the high school teacher's advantage to closely observe the new 2019 CED Unit Guide that more clearly articulates the content of the AP curriculum and

provides suggestions for the amount of time to devote to particular topics. For college faculty, an increased awareness of the AP curriculum would also help them establish reciprocal relationships with high school teachers, whereby both can share strategies and resources to best serve and prepare students for college music study. The Music Theory Pedagogy Outreach Project that is sponsored by the Society for Music Theory's Committee on Diversity and Pedagogy Interest Group is an excellent resource for such efforts.²³

Finally, the themes that emerged from our results raise questions about the way AP Music Theory compares with AP courses in other disciplines. The current AP Music Theory curriculum is geared toward earning credit for 1–2 semesters of two sequenced courses (music theory and ear training) that exist within a music degree. This might work well for students who excel on the AP exam and are accepted into a college music program. The AP course also benefits those students by providing “a better understanding of what it is to be a music major,” which helps them choose to pursue a music degree “not just because they like band, or orchestra, or choir” (college survey participant). However, AP Music Theory classes sometimes include students without prior music experience who are taking the class to satisfy an arts elective requirement and do not intend to become music majors. One college survey participant addressed this issue by saying that “we offer university credit for a score of 3. We do not offer credit in the major, however. A student who studied AP Music Theory and scored a 3 and then went on to get a degree in political science would receive college credit for the score.” This strategy is more consistent with AP courses in other disciplines, which are typically stand-alone classes that are part of an institution's core curriculum and thereby exist outside a student's major. Additionally, a high school participant remarked that AP Music Theory “may be the only AP class that technically doesn't have a prerequisite which is offered in most schools.” If approached similarly to these other disciplines, an AP music class could be designed to coordinate with a single-semester fundamentals or music literature course that fulfills a non-music major's core curriculum fine arts requirement.

Our study is the first music theory-related work conducted outside the College Board to address the degree of alignment between college, the AP Music Theory curriculum, and the amount of time high school educators spend on topics. As college faculty, we tried to eliminate any biases that might favor college curricula over that of the AP. Bipartisan perspectives have been offered throughout to ensure a fair representation of our participant population. Critics and supporters alike share a

²³ See <https://musictheoryoutreach.com>.

concern for the scope and rigor of the content. Perhaps there was a presumption that the breadth of the AP Music Theory program is required due to dramatic variations in when college faculty introduce topics across their 4-semester curriculum, thereby ensuring that high school students are prepared for any college that they might attend. If so, our analysis disentangles this notion by confirming that substantial curricular consistency exists across different universities throughout the country. Instead, competing themes of exposure and fluency emerge within certain topics that undermine the most compelling contributions to the students that take the AP Music Theory course: the opportunity to “learn to recognize, understand and describe the basic materials and processes of music” that goes into the depth encountered in an equivalent “one- or two-semester introductory college course.”²⁴ This suggests that a less comprehensive curriculum could better enable students to master the fundamental musical skills that are most likely to occur in any school’s first-year music theory or ear training courses.

²⁴ <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-music-theory>; <https://aphighered.collegeboard.org/courses-exams/arts/music-theory>.

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