Course Access Reflection Questions

In *The Opportunity Myth*, we found that most schools with a higher proportion of white students or those from higher-income backgrounds tended to provide a wider array of advanced and honors courses. Consequently, these students had significantly greater access to advanced courses than their peers of color or from lower-income backgrounds. In one district, for example, 56 percent of all 11th and 12th graders took at least one AP class, but only 27 percent of students of color did so.

Students who have access to rigorous content and challenging, engaging instruction are better-positioned to meet their goals for themselves. As a district leader, you have the opportunity to ensure that all students have access to courses that are more likely to set them up for success in college or in their careers.

But how? The first step has to be assessing the current state of your district: which of your students are taking advanced and honors courses? From there, you can build a plan to address the specific inequities you see in course access and enrollment across your district. Use this set of questions to help assess the current state of your district. (Note: if you’re a school leader, you can start with step two to look for inequity within your building.)

**Step 1: Look for course access and enrollment trends across your district.**

Use your course access and enrollment data to answer the following questions:

- **How much do your schools vary in the advanced courses they offer? Which schools provide more access to advanced courses?**
  - For each high school in your district, determine the number of unique advanced courses offered (e.g., if a school offers several sections of AP Calculus and AP Biology, that’s two unique courses) and the proportion of core subject classes in each school that are advanced versions.
  - How different are your schools on these values? Do the schools in the top quartile have significantly more advanced offerings than those in the bottom quartile (a difference of more than five unique courses), or do your schools have a difference of five or fewer courses?
  - How do the values you calculated above connect to other characteristics of your schools? For example, do schools with higher proportions of students from low-income backgrounds (defined by free and reduced price lunch rates) have more or less access to advanced courses? What about schools with more students of color?

- **Which students enroll in advanced courses across your district?**
  - Among high school students, what percentage of students take at least one advanced course? What is the average number of advanced courses your high school students take?
  - What proportion of your high school students are students of color? From low-income backgrounds? English language learners? Female? Students with mild to moderate disabilities?
  - How do the demographics of your schools compare to the demographics of your advanced courses? For example, if your district serves 65 percent students of color, are your advanced courses also serving roughly 65 percent students of color, or is there a mismatch between your advanced courses and your district’s overall demographics?
  - How many advanced courses does the typical white student in your district complete versus the typical student of color? What about other demographic comparisons?

**Step 2: Look for enrollment trends within schools.**

Use your course access and enrollment data to answer the following questions:

- **Which students enroll in advanced courses within schools?**
  - For each high school in your district, calculate the percentage of students taking at least one advanced course by different demographic characteristics. For example, how does enrollment differ between white students and students of color?
Step 3: Look at trends by subject.

Use your course access and enrollment data to answer the following questions:

- **Does enrollment in advanced courses differ by subject?**
  - Looking at enrollment trends by subject allows you to focus on demographic groups that have faced historical barriers to accessing certain fields, like female students in advanced STEM classes.
  - Repeat Steps 1 and 2 above but focus on advanced courses in a particular subject. For example, do high schools in your district differ in terms of how many advanced math courses they offer? What about in terms of which students enroll in advanced math courses? Within each school, are certain types of students more likely to take advanced math classes?