NCS announced on June 18, 2018, that, by the 2022-2023 school year, it will no longer offer any courses labeled as Advanced Placement, or AP. Here are answers to questions that this announcement may likely prompt:

**What is Advanced Placement?**

The AP program is a standardized curriculum that is designed and sponsored by an outside company, the College Board. AP courses typically last a full school year, culminating in a year-ending AP exam, and they are meant to be comparable to college-level courses.

The year-end tests have increasingly become a proxy for assessing a school’s academic quality, boosted in part by news outlets that seek to rank schools nationally (an approach that we and other independent schools across the nation oppose).

**Why is NCS making this change to its curriculum?**

What the 21st-century scholar requires is the opportunity to learn in community: experience working in groups and pursuing interdisciplinary questions; developing complex problem-solving skills and the ability to critically analyze emergent situations. Given their standardized nature, AP courses resist this dynamic. With NCS removing these courses, faculty will be free to create courses that better reflect both our school’s values and students’ interests, leading to a healthier, more joyful environment for all.

The NCS curriculum is widely recognized as providing an exceptionally strong foundation for college. This reputation rests wholly on the accomplishments and dedication of our talented faculty and students, not on an externally developed course of study that focuses fully on one test in May.

At the same time, the heightened attention to AP courses has given them an outsize impact that was never intended and is not appropriate. It also has diminished, data suggest, families’ interest in and commitment to other elements of a complete education, such as community service, athletics and arts education, and extracurricular activities. None of this is consistent with NCS’s educational values. Plainly stated, we believe AP courses compromise our commitment to provide an education consistent with our independent school mission.

**Why is NCS making this change now?**

It is important to note that NCS first stepped back from APs in the early 1970s, when we eliminated AP English from the curriculum. The slate of English electives that we now offer are far more inspiring and challenging than the prescribed AP curriculum, and our students who choose to sit for the AP English test continue to perform well on that assessment even without a course focused on the exam. This is the model we are now embracing school-wide.

In 2016-2017, we removed AP U.S. History for three reasons: 1) We disagreed with its choice of breadth over depth; 2) We saw including the course as detracting from the intellectual rigor we
value; and 3) The demands of covering the prescribed curriculum required more homework of students than we see as reasonable. So that our students may challenge themselves in the social sciences, we are introducing two courses in 2018-2019: a new honors history seminar for seniors; and a honors art history class that connects social sciences and art.

Over the next year, our math, science, and world language departments will closely examine curriculum offerings with an eye toward expanding 21st-century skills and opportunities for interdisciplinary educational experiences. The courses that develop as a result will speak to students’ interests and passions and be appropriately challenging.

**Is this a sign of NCS stepping away from its broader educational philosophy?**

In fact, this step is driven by our educational philosophy. As an independent school, NCS has the opportunity and the obligation to explore the very best ways to educate our students. A more flexible curriculum, one that attracts, inspires, and challenges students, will better allow us to address their needs and prepare them for their dynamic futures.

**Will St. Albans continue to offer AP classes?**

St. Albans and NCS are moving toward new, independent curricula in a coordinated manner, as befits our shared Cathedral-school status. By the 2022-2023 school year, neither will offer AP courses. In addition, six other independent schools in the Washington, D.C., area—Georgetown Day, Holton-Arms, Landon, Maret, Potomac, and Sidwell Friends—have also determined that the time is right for them to discontinue offering AP classes.

**Will NCS still offer AP tests?**

Yes, as is our practice today, a student can take an AP test without having to take the corresponding AP course. NCS and St. Albans understand that some students may use an AP exam to demonstrate their learning in subject areas of interest, and we expect some teachers will encourage NCS students to take them at the end of the year if the course curriculum prepared them for the assessment. Other students will find that SAT, ACT, or subject test scores suffice for them.

**Will NCS still offer AP test preparation?**

Under the current system, students are expected to prepare for AP tests outside of class. Moving forward, NCS will communicate which courses will align with the AP curriculum and prepare students for a select AP test. Keep in mind that, with minimal “exam prep,” NCS students routinely record scores above the national average on the AP English Literature exam, a credit to the English department’s rigorous electives.
How will NCS’s new approach on APs be communicated to colleges and universities?

Early feedback from university professors indicates that this change will be positively received, given the relative efficacy of the standardized AP curriculum as compared with more innovative educational approaches.

With regard to the application process, the admission offices at many colleges and universities assess the extent to which any applicant has taken the most rigorous classes available. Students who attend a school without AP courses are, generally speaking, at no inherent competitive disadvantage to those at a school with AP courses. The important element to admissions officers is whether the student is making the most of the opportunities available to her — a question that, in the case of NCS seniors, is routinely a resounding “yes.”

The College Guidance office has always worked closely with colleges and universities to communicate the unique features of our program and the nature of all our course offerings so that student transcripts are appropriately reviewed. This work will expand going forward to provide additional detail about our scope and sequence, including our most rigorous classes.

Created: June 18, 2018