Student Performance Q&A:

2014 AP® Human Geography Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® Human Geography were written by the Chief Reader, Don Zeigler, Old Dominion University, Virginia Beach Higher Education Center in Virginia Beach, Va. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to determine students' understanding of economic development models. The question's focus on economic development via different models and theories, countries, and scales provided students with opportunities to demonstrate a wide and varied understanding of core components of the economic geography section of the course. Rostow's economic development model and Wallerstein's world system theory are essential concepts of the course. The students were asked to compare differences between Rostow's five-stage model of economic growth and the core-periphery concept of Wallerstein's world system theory. The purpose of the question was to have the students provide and compare differences between the models, apply the models with real-world examples of Mexico and Brazil, and demonstrate an understanding of scale and core-periphery below the national scale application.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.39 out of a possible 7 points. About 30 percent of students received 0 points on this question and a negligible number received a full 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Finding differences between the two models was the most difficult part of the question, and only 3 percent of students scored all three points in part a. Many students simply described one or both models, but rarely in tandem. Students were awarded a point only if they stated both sides of the comparison. For example: In Rostow's model uneven global development can be lessened, but in Wallerstein's model uneven global development is a basic characteristic of the world system. That statement would have been awarded one point. The second part of the question was the highest scoring. Students were able to link one of the models to Mexico or Brazil. A common error, though, was confusing the five stages of Rostow's economic growth model with the five stages of the demographic transition model. The major error that characterized

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responses to part c was not citing an example "below the national scale." Students lost points because they talked about global regions or more-developed countries versus less-developed countries.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

First, teachers need to be using the Course Description, not any particular textbook, as a basis for deciding what to cover in class. Rostow's model is covered in all the popular textbooks, but Wallerstein's model is covered in only some of them. Nevertheless, Wallerstein's world system theory is in the course outline and needs to be covered as part of the AP® Human Geography course. Second, students need practice in finding differences and likenesses between models and concepts. Thinking comparatively is an important skill in an introductory college geography course and needs to be stressed in AP® Human Geography. Often, comparative thinking will require recognizing how concepts in different parts of the course outline share or do not share characteristics. When presented with "compare" as an operator in a question, students should write about both concepts equally and completely.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined students' understanding of the connections of international borders and the lasting effects of colonialism. The modern political boundaries of Africa, which were laid down by colonial powers, continue to present consequences and challenges within and among African states. In the first part of the question, the students were asked to define the concept of a superimposed boundary. In the second part, students were expected to demonstrate understanding of the political and cultural consequences of superimposed boundaries in Africa. Finally, the question allowed students to demonstrate knowledge on the challenges for landlocked African states in developing viable economies.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.81 out of a possible 6 points. Only about 13 percent of students received 0 points and 8 percent received a full 6 points. For every score in between, there was a very even distribution. About 14–17 percent of students fell in each category, 1 through 5. This question sorted student responses well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students seem not to have memorized a definition of superimposed boundaries. Rather, and probably better, they seem to have come up with their own definitions based on an understanding of the concept. If there was a problem in providing a definition, it was that students did not use very precise language even though they were able to get the point across. The second part of the question asked for three "political or cultural consequences," but some students gave three *examples* of ethnic conflicts, which earned them only one point. Although a definition was not required to earn points in the third part, students sometimes missed points because they did not specifically point out that access to the ocean was the essential condition that challenged economic development in landlocked states; "access to water" did not earn them a point.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

First, when teaching vocabulary, do it conceptually. Give students every opportunity to move beyond *define* and *identify*. Students should be able to conceptualize a vocabulary word and apply it in different place-based contexts. Explaining how they have applied the concept is the higher-order skill toward which

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students should be directed. Second, do not depend on textbooks or canned definitions. Teachers should rely on the Course Description to guide them in the choice of content. To the course outline, teachers must add details, historical context, and help students understand geography as a process. What should students know about boundaries? According to the course outline, their "nature, meaning, and function" and their influence on "identity, interaction, and exchange." By classifying boundaries into different types (e.g., superimposed boundaries), teachers are able to deepen their students' understanding of these concepts.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to determine students' understanding of coffee production and its effect on the global economy and landscape. The students were asked to apply their geographic knowledge to the global production and consumption of coffee, as well as the effects on the urban landscapes of the developed world. In part A, students were asked to describe a common characteristic shared by coffee producing countries. Part B asked students to explain the two impacts of coffee farming on producing countries. For part C, students were asked to identify and explain how coffee consumption outside the growing areas affects its production. Finally, in part D, students were asked to explain one change in the urban landscape in the developed world caused by coffee consumption.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.74 out of a possible 7 points. Only about 2 percent of students received 0 points and 3 percent received a full 7 points. In between the two extremes, was a clustering of scores between 3 and 5 points, with 26 percent of students receiving 4 points on this question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In identifying a common characteristic of coffee-producing countries, students did not earn a point if they wandered too far away from the central concept of coffee production. For example, "located in the tropics" and "plantation agriculture" were acceptable, but identifying a stage in the demographic transition model was not. In the second part of the question, students were required to explain two impacts. Sometimes, however, the answers were too closely related to award two separate points. For example, if a student explained deforestation as one impact and loss of biodiversity as another impact, they earned one point only because they are closely-related environmental impacts. In the third part of the question, the identification point was easily earned, with "increased production" being the most frequent response. There were very few errors found in answers to this part. In the final part of the question, the vast majority of students earned one point by referring to an increasing number of coffee shops on the urban landscape. Better students earned the second point by explaining the growth of coffee consumption. Not many common errors were found in scoring this question.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

First, encourage students to fully elaborate when they are asked to provide an explanation. "The urban landscape is different because there are a lot more coffee shops in urban areas than there used to be." That response to part d would be worth only one point. What "value-added" information could the student have added to earn a second point? An explanation of where coffee shops might be located with respect to consumers, how diffusion driven by corporate chains has been uncovering new markets, or how coffee shops are part of the homogenization of many urban landscapes. Second, basic geographic vocabulary can earn students points. In the context of this question, being able to come up with "tropics" or "low latitudes" would have earned them one (presumably easy) point. Given a slight re-wording of the question,

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knowing the names of countries that appear on this map might have earned them a point. Basic geographic knowledge helps students think about more complex geographic patterns and processes.

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