



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP[®] Human Geography Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP[®] Human Geography were written by the Chief Reader, David A Lanegran of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. 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 designed to allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the impact on the cultural landscape of walls and barriers constructed along countries' borders. The question first asked students to identify three walls or other barriers that were constructed by countries from 1900 to the present day. The question then asked students to explain the purpose behind one of the examples they provided in part a. In part c students were instructed to discuss the effect of walls or barriers built on countries' borders in each of three categories: social or political consequences, economic consequences, and environmental consequences.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.32 out of a possible 7 points.

Most students could provide at least two examples of walls or other barriers constructed since 1900. The most common examples were the wall between Israel and Palestine (the West Bank), the wall and fence along the United States–Mexico border, and the Berlin Wall.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In the first part a common error was to identify the Great Wall of China. If students identified a proper example they typically received credit for the reason for the wall. However, some students were not clear about the reason for the Berlin Wall. Students had more difficulty with an assessment of the impact of the wall they selected. Generally they understood the political and social consequences but had great difficulty assessing economic and environmental impacts. Typically they confused general border effects on trade (customs, border cross procedures, etc.) with the specific impact of a wall.

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?

Teachers should be aware of their students' lack of historic depth. In the political geography section teachers will need to provide historical context for border issues. It is also important to present students with a wide range of examples of the impact of geopolitical processes. There is also a need to cover in some detail the changing nature of political boundaries. Borders within the European Union have become more open, whereas the borders of the United States and other countries have become more closed.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The first half of this question was designed to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of subsistence agriculture, using the practice of shifting cultivation as an example. In the second half of the question, students were expected to show an understanding of the concept of sustainability within the context of shifting cultivation. The question asked students to define subsistence agriculture and to describe the processes involved in shifting cultivation in parts A and B. In part C students were asked to provide an explanation of how shifting cultivation was sustainable in earlier times. In part D they were asked to explain two reasons why shifting cultivation is expected to decline in the future.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.71 out of a possible 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students needed to identify all three elements of shifting cultivation (clearing the wild vegetation, tillage, and moving) in their description in part B; most students could provide one or two but not three.

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?

Students appear to have a basic knowledge of subsistence agriculture and why it is becoming less common. Students lost points on this question because of incomplete answers, which indicates that they may not have totally understood the relationship between the environment and the practicality of this way of life. Students generally do less well on questions dealing with the geography of agriculture than they do on the other topics. Therefore teachers are encouraged to spend time covering all aspects of agricultural geography and not focus on just a few of the more controversial aspects of contemporary commercial agriculture.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of Muslim immigration to Europe, including the locations, motivations, and impacts of immigrant populations. Using a map of European countries with data on the percent of Muslim population, students were asked to identify the three countries labeled X, Y, and Z on the map. The question then asked students to explain two reasons behind increases in Muslim immigration to one of the three countries. Then, for the same country, the

question asked students to describe the impact of an increasing Muslim population in terms of urban spatial organization, population structure, and social relations.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.04 out of a possible 6 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students misidentified one or more of the countries. This is quite surprising because the countries are well-known. In addition, students clearly have very vague ideas of the geography of religion or important geopolitical connections among regions. For example, immigration by Muslims to the Netherlands and France is greatly affected by prior colonial connections. Furthermore Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, was formerly a Dutch colony. Students generally understood the demographic impact of immigrants but had an incomplete understanding of the impact of these immigrants on urban geography and the culture of the host country.

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?

Students need to have some drill on place geography. It is assumed that the AP Human Geography course is not the first geography course taken by students. In many states a world regional geography or world cultures class is required in middle school. Teachers working in states without such a middle school requirement need to make sure their students learn basic place knowledge.

It is always important for teachers to help students see the connections among the various sections of the course — in this case, the links between geopolitics and economic development.

Students in general do well on population questions that are explicitly focused on the demographic transition but less well on questions that assume knowledge of the transition model and require an understanding of the economic and social implications of the model. We are confident that students learn the model, but we continue to encourage teachers to help students understand its implications. In this case the European countries whose populations are at stage 4/5 of the transition need labor, and countries going through the transition have a young population with a high propensity to migrate.

Geographers use models to help them predict spatial patterns and changes in those patterns. Students should be encouraged to think of the models of the internal spatial structure of cities as guides to their understanding of current patterns and not static patterns of past urban landscapes. Therefore it is necessary for teachers to augment most textbook treatments of these models by making sure students understand the processes that produce the various patterns of land use. For example, students should understand immigrant groups forming communities of affinity, the impact of transportation on urban land use, the economic competition for access that creates a surface of land value, and so forth. Knowledge of the geometry of the models is only the beginning. Because most students lacked the ability to use the models, they could not comment on the impact of Muslim immigration on European cities.