IB 101:

TEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM AT MID-PACIFIC

BY LAVONNE LEONG
More than three decades after its foundation, Mid-Pacific's groundbreaking International Baccalaureate (IB) program is going strong. But there is still an aura of mystery about being an “IB World School.” Who takes IB classes? Is the program only for students who want to go abroad for college? What makes the IB Program different from others? Will it be a good fit for my child? Here are the answers, and more.

NATIONWIDE, MID-PACIFIC WAS ONE OF THE IB PROGRAM’S EARLY PIONEERS.

In 1986, Mid-Pacific Institute, recognizing the advantages of offering the rigorous, internationally recognized International Baccalaureate program to students, became the first school in Hawai’i to adopt the IB program. Two decades ago, the school was asked to help create and pilot the IB dance curriculum, which is now available throughout the world in a modified form. And this year, Mid-Pacific is part of the first cohort of schools worldwide to teach the IB Global Politics course. “Mid-Pacific has always been an innovator in the IB program,” says Assistant Principal and Director of the IB Program, Gareth Russell.

THE IB PROGRAM IS GLOBAL FROM THE GROUND UP.

Founded in Geneva for the families of diplomats who wanted their children to have a top-notch education wherever they were stationed, the IB program has an international outlook built into its foundation. Every course, not just Global Politics, is built on the knowledge that people from different cultures think differently. For example, whereas a standard high school English program might cover American and British Literature only, IB English students could be asked to compare a work by a German author with one written by an Indonesian author. IB Dance explores not just ballet and jazz, but the many different types and purposes of dance across the world.

The way students are educated and assessed is also more global, adds Mid-Pacific High School Principal Tom McManus, who has a long experience with IB schools. McManus says that in contrast with other college-level high school programs like the AP courses, IB schools assess students’ progress throughout the year through a variety of avenues appropriate to the subject, which could be written papers, presentations, on-the-spot oral discussion and analysis. “It’s not just ‘Do you know?’” says McManus, “but ‘Can you articulate it? Can you do it?’”

UNIVERSITIES—WHETHER AMERICAN OR INTERNATIONAL—LIKE TO SEE IB COURSES ON A HIGH-SCHOOL TRANSCRIPT.

“Colleges love IB students,” says Russell. “Colleges know that when a student does the IB program, they have been challenged, they are critical thinkers.” An IB diploma or IB classes make it much easier to be admitted to a university overseas, but also for an American college to make an admissions decision, since the IB class curricula and level of difficulty are uniform throughout the nation and the world. As the program’s quality has become widely known across the United States, says Russell, “The IB has expended exponentially, especially in the last ten or twenty years,” and with a US expansion comes instant recognition among colleges. Internationally, Mid-Pacific graduates are currently at universities in Great Britain, Canada, and Italy.

THE IB CAN HAVE OTHER PERKS, TOO.

The IB’s effects don’t stop at college admission, says Russell. The official IB exams are taken after college admissions letters go out, but at many institutions (though not all), a student’s high score can mean college course credit. In addition, says Russell, the IB students tend to receive better scholarship offers, and to thrive in college. It’s the preparation for college the IB offers that’s the main course, says Russell: “The college credit is the icing on the cake.”

THE IB HAS A CORE, TAKEN BY ALL STUDENTS...

Mid-Pacific’s IB program runs in grades 11 and 12 only. Each student who goes through the IB diploma program must take a portfolio of six IB courses, with a goal of producing a well-rounded student with across-the-board competencies who can think critically and globally. The first core course is Theory of Knowledge, which Russell describes as a “critical thinking class: ‘What is good knowledge and what is not?’ ‘What is strong science and what is junk science?’ ‘What is real news and what is fake news?’”

The second is the IB Extended Essay, during which a student chooses a topic, and does primary research to develop their independent research skills. Topics cover a broad, student-chosen range. “They’ve done everything from hula, to engineering, to English literature,” says Russell.

The third central pillar of the IB diploma is “Creativity, Activity and Service” (CAS), for which students need to practice service to the community, show a creative approach, and have an active component. “The IB doesn’t want students who are just in the books all the time, and that’s all they’re doing,” says Russell, adding that the range of ways to fulfill this requirement is wide: “You can be creative in digitally editing a film, or in solving a math or science problem.” Activity and service can be beach cleanups, volunteer work or self-guided projects.

Russell stresses the importance of these core competencies to the IB program: “The IB philosophy is that the humanities students still need a sense of mathematics and reasoning skills. And we still want mathematicians and scientists to be storytellers and communicators, because in the real world, mathematicians and scientists need to be able to communicate their
ideas. So while they’re strong in certain areas, they develop in other areas too.”

**BUT THE IB DIPLOMA IS ALSO HIGHLY CUSTOMIZABLE.**

“I build IB diploma programs with students to match their interests and passions,” says Russell. “An IB diploma program is very different from one student to another.” And the fact that the program has six modular categories (English, social studies, world language, science, math, and an art or elective) “enables me to build diplomas that more match students’ needs,” says Russell. “If you look at the social studies category, it contains tech and environmental science classes, because technology has a social impact on society and so does environmental science. So for your real science-y kids, they don’t have to do history, they can do information technology in a global society. Four of six subjects can be math/science/tech, and it will still be an IB diploma.” IB diplomas can be specialized toward almost any trajectory, from international studies to technology to humanities.

**ABOUT 15% OF EVERY MID-PACIFIC CLASS ENDS UP DOING THE FULL IB PROGRAM.**

34 out of the 200 current juniors this year are enrolled in the full IB program. In their sophomore year, potential full-IB students are invited, based on test scores, grades, and learning dispositions. One round of IB program invitations goes out at the end of the fall semester, with a few more invitations extended in the spring. If a student or their family feels that they belong in the IB but weren’t invited, says Russell, they can always approach him. “Sometimes the quieter kids get overlooked,” says Russell, “They can self-identify too and (the faculty) will always look into it.” Every year, some self-identified students also join the IB diploma program.

The full IB diploma is demanding, stresses Russell, and it may not be for students whose interests and passions lie elsewhere. “IB is a fantastic program, but we try to meet the needs and the passions of all our students. For many, it’s the IB, for some it’s the school of the arts, for some it’s tech. What sets us apart, is that we’re a school of choices.”

**BUT ANY STUDENT CAN ALSO TAKE IB COURSES À LA CARTE.**

What’s also notable, says Russell, is that any student may choose to take an IB class—and, despite a challenging and varied course offering that includes AP classes and specialized school of the arts courses, around 60% of students do take one or more IB courses. “That participation is very high,” says Russell. “We don’t make them do it.”

**THE IB IS DOABLE.**

“It is a lot of work, for sure,” says Russell. “It develops really effective time management skills. If you can do an IB diploma at Mid-Pacific in your junior and senior year, you will have learned excellent time management skills for life.” And it’s possible to lead a full life outside the demanding IB program. “IB kids are baseball players, they’re hula students, they’re paddlers, they’re in the arts. You can do it, that’s where the time management comes in,” says Russell. “You don’t have to give those up.”

The IB’s inherently global perspective prepares students for the complexities of a global future. “We are all citizens of our countries,” says Russell, who is originally from England, “but we’re all world citizens whether we like it or not. An IB diploma student walks out with more of a global perspective and a global understanding.”