

Menlo's Strengths and Opportunities for Growth (Part II)

From Than Healy, John Schafer, and La Vina Lowery

Last week, in a KnightLine you can read [here](#), we shared a few strengths and growth opportunities from recent surveys of parents, students, and alumni as well as from our WASC self-study. We are pleased to continue that conversation now by turning our attention to the strengths and areas for growth that relate specifically to our academic program.



Strengths – Part II

There were a number of strengths that came through loud and clear:

Fostering an environment of academic excellence that prepares students for college

We believe in a combination of high challenge and high support for our students, and all three surveys indicated that we are achieving this. Current students expressed the ways Menlo aids them in progressively taking more responsibility for their education, something our alumni respondents said served them well in college. Alumni indicated that they were well prepared for college and, perhaps more importantly, that the School was outstanding at helping students stretch themselves. Our alumni also expressed that their abilities to write, think, and express their thoughts were defining elements of their Menlo education. Accordingly, it wasn't surprising to learn parents also considered this area as one of our greatest strengths.

Building independent, creative thinkers

We are proud that one of the traits of a Menlo education is that we lift self-imposed ceilings for our students by challenging them to think for themselves and go beyond mere memorization. One of the most important and most elusive goals of a Menlo education is the ability to make meaning of wide swaths of data in new and creative ways. The world will demand that our children are chefs, not cooks: they must be able to bring forward ideas that do not currently exist. Our belief is that a chef's training doesn't begin in college or in the working world but rather in middle and high school. We are proud of the alumni we graduate into the world who are quite mature in this way, and we are pleased that our most important constituent groups see this as both a priority and a hallmark of a Menlo education.

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Fostering courage, integrity, and ethical behavior in students

Perhaps most important to us as educators is that our students interact in the world with moral courage and clarity. It's fair to say that most of this education happens in the home though we know that school has a significant role in reinforcing the development of character. We feel fortunate to be able to work with our students who are fundamentally decent, civil, and empathic. We were pleased to see respondents to the parent and alumni surveys validate our sense that Menlo does a very good job of helping to develop character in its students. There was some fair critique of our work in helping students develop a sense of purpose larger than themselves—an especially challenging goal particularly during adolescence when students tend to focus more on themselves and the obstacles of navigating the many “have tos” in front of them—and we will write more about this later in this Knightline.

Outstanding arts and athletics programs

The wide variety of opportunities that Menlo offers to participate in both the creative arts and athletics is something our community deeply values and expressed as one of our key strengths. Few programs at Menlo are better at teaching resilience, empathy, collaboration, risk-taking, and grace. The fact that our arts faculty and athletics coaches are havens for many of our students and supplement the adult care on campus for our students just further strengthens our students' experiences while they are here.

At Menlo, we don't view our arts programs as addendums to the curriculum, but rather as central to our mission to help prepare our students. The benefits of an arts education are

many, and our arts programs are not just for artistically-minded students. Much has been written recently about the important connections and lessons learned in the arts that help strengthen education in STEM-related classes. And yet, across the country and even in our Upper School, we are seeing declining enrollment in the arts. The affirmations we get from our parents and alumni about the strength and impact of our arts programs belies these trends. We have work to do in this area to help connect more students to our arts classes.

The success we see in athletics enhances and supplements the classroom experience and is truly a part of a complete Menlo education. Every Middle School student and nearly 80% of our Upper School students participate in at least one sport each year, and we take pride in finding success on the scoreboard without sacrificing success in developing character, teaching grace and humility, and “doing it the right way.”

There is certainly more that we can do to strengthen these two programs, not the least of which is to continue to strive towards facilities that can serve the performing arts and some of our athletes even better.

Areas of Focus – Part II

Here are some areas we continue to focus on.

Calibrating Rigor

One set of issues we have been working hard on in recent years is calibrating the combination of academic load, the rigor of our program, and the well-being of our students. This has been of particular emphasis in the Upper School, and we've taken a number of steps to better balance these factors. In addition to our own internal deliberations and introspection about where to pitch the level of challenge, the survey results showed some positive trends, and yet, this remains an area we continue to assess and monitor closely.

We widely surveyed parents, students, and alumni to assess how they perceive the rigor of our program. Parents rate the academics here as one of the School's great strengths and nearly three-quarters of families say the amount of homework and level of challenge was about right given their

family's expectations and preparation for college while one-quarter of parents feel the workload is too much and the challenge of the program is too high.

Survey results confirmed that the new schedule has resulted in our students spending less time on homework overall, and the increased tutorial time has helped them do more of their work during the school day. In comparing the results of the Challenge Success student survey data from 2018 with that of 2016 (prior to the schedule change), students in grades 9-11 say they are now doing an average of 22 fewer minutes of homework on weekdays and 24 fewer minutes on weekend days. While this can vary based on students' course load and learning style, this equates to an average of 2 1/2 hours per day for freshmen and just about 3 hours for juniors. Our Middle School students are doing about 12 minutes less, which is around 2 hours per day. These numbers now fall more in line with our target homework expectations.

With our revamped schedule yielding fewer but longer class sessions, students are covering a bit less material than before. This has helped dial back the rigor some as students take on fewer books, papers, and projects. It has also enabled students to focus and engage more deeply in the content they do cover. Anecdotally, students are saying they are retaining and learning more. And, on a somewhat related but less educationally important note, Upper School AP scores from last May's exams were just as strong as always. We commend the faculty for the thought and work they put in to adjust their curriculum, for their efforts to ensure the work they

assign is meaningful and not simply busy work, and for their commitment to the health, sense of balance, and well-being of our students.

In our most recent alumni survey, we asked members of the class of 2016 (most of the 73 respondents were in their second semester of sophomore year in college) to look back on their Menlo years. Ninety-nine percent "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that Menlo prepared them academically for college, and their narrative comments had some overwhelming themes: relative to their peers, Menlo grads feel prepared for college-level work (and they are grateful for that), confident in their ability to manage their time and responsibilities, and proud that they have developed a work ethic that makes college load seem manageable. At the same time, many expressed a wistfulness that this preparation came at a price: their Menlo years seemed too stressful, and they felt a pressure to take as many hard classes as possible and to do well in all their courses. As these alumni graduated prior to the implementation of the schedule change, we plan to continue to survey our alumni and track this trendline over time.

For some Upper School respondents grades and rigor were intertwined, and as you may know, we've made some moves in this area as well. In the Upper School, we adjusted

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upwards the GPA boost for honors or AP classes, from .3 to .5, and expanded the number of honors offerings in the humanities classes. Predictably, GPAs last year moved up across the board, as we made the grade boost retroactive. We also believe that moving to officially reporting only year-long grades starting last year has also reduced stress, as students can take the long view of their progress in a class, and teachers can weigh more heavily what they can do in April relative to what they can't yet do in October.



Purposes larger than oneself

When our various constituencies are asked to rate us on how well we fare in actualizing the elements of our mission statement, academic excellence invariably gets the highest marks, while “developing a commitment to purposes larger than oneself” is typically ranked toward the bottom. We believe not only that the institution has to be a force for positive change—to launch kids who can and will make the world better—but also that students’ sense of fulfillment and future happiness in life are linked to their engagement in something that they find absorbing, challenging, and compelling and that makes a valued contribution to the world beyond the self.

We are determined to make more progress in this area. We have new community engagement coordinators in both divisions—Tri Huynh in the Middle School and Chris Young in the Upper School—both of whom bring energy and fresh ideas to their work. In the Middle School, the Habits of the Heart and Mind, which launched last fall, has invigorated our advocacy program and Human Skills classes and provided new avenues to develop civic-minded adolescents. The Middle School Service Week, where the students work with elementary school students in the community, volunteer for organizations helping those in need, and learn about our environment and sustainability, allows students to see beyond themselves. In the Upper School, Menlo Abroad, which added two new trips last year and more than doubled the number of participants, gives students opportunities to experience

cultural immersion, develop meaningful relationships, and cultivate a deeper sense of global citizenship. Our new M Term program brings civic engagement into the curriculum by getting students out into the world, meeting people from different backgrounds, and truly understanding area public policy challenges like the cycle of poverty, educational equity, and affordable housing.

There are several ways parents can partner with us to help us make progress in this work. First, please support our new people who are spearheading our community engagement efforts. Reach out to them and offer to volunteer during Service Week and the myriad volunteer opportunities. Second, we ask you to talk with your children about service and purposes larger than oneself as much or more than you talk and inquire about your own child’s achievement and happiness. During the teenage years, it is all too easy to become self-absorbed, so helping students focus on things other than themselves is really important. Finally, consider sending your child on a Menlo Abroad trip; few things can open their eyes to the lives of other people than having an immersive travel and homestay experience.

In Closing

At its best, Menlo School is a partnership between experienced, passionate, caring educators; curious, thoughtful, committed students; and dedicated, loving, supportive parents. We strive as a school to provide a



compelling educational vision that features engagement, relevance, and challenge for our students, to instill a love of learning in our students, to maintain high-quality teachers and educational standards, to give students opportunities to build connections with caring teachers, advocates, and coaches, and to provide a wide breadth of opportunities for our students. And in doing so, we will be consistent and transparent with you, we will outline clear processes for giving feedback to us, and we will acknowledge, respect, and take seriously concerns that parents bring forward.

And in return, it is our hope that that parents will partner with us in a manner that helps to exemplify our values, act upon their gratitude, actively champion school values and community norms, and be proud ambassadors for Menlo. We hope parents will start from a place of trust, build positive interactions, know and respect that faculty and staff have your child's best interests at heart, have the perspective to contextualize the importance of minor issues and understand that humans will sometimes make mistakes, and hold other parents to these expectations with compassion and candor.

In closing, we wish to thank everyone who took time to respond to these surveys. Your feedback was exceedingly helpful. We are also deeply grateful to parent volunteers Kristi Patterson and Robbie Fang who handled the anonymous survey feedback from the Parent Survey, compiling and grouping the themes in hundreds of pages of feedback.

We hope these two KnightLines have offered you a snapshot of how the School is doing and what we are focusing on. Yes, there are some areas where we can be better, and we are committed to doing that work. But we don't want to close without noting that throughout this process, it's been overwhelmingly clear that Menlo's strengths far exceed its opportunities for growth, and it is a great place for students to learn and grow.

We truly believe that we can be the school we imagine for our students if we can partner—school and parents—on behalf of our children.

For more information about these survey results, you are also invited to attend the Joint Middle and Upper School MSPA Meeting on Wednesday, Nov. 7, at 8:45-10:00 am (hospitality begins at 8:15 am), in Martin Family Hall.

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KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website each month, with an email alert including a link sent to all parents. For questions, please contact Alex Perez, Director of Communications, via email at alex.perez@menloschool.org or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

