

Dear Menlo School Community,

We're pleased to report to you the findings of our parent survey that we conducted this past spring. The survey, which we administer every two years, is an important forum for us to hear firsthand from so many of you about what you think Menlo is doing well and where we can do better.

An incredible 89 percent of parents completed the survey this year—the most we have ever had. Thank you to all who took the time to provide your honest and thoughtful feedback! We are also extremely grateful to the two parents and two former Menlo parents who did some unbelievable work helping us catalog the hundreds of parent responses: Joy Elliott, Teresa Godfrey, Dana Nunn, and Kristi Patterson. These four volunteers took an immense amount of raw data and categorized and cross-referenced it and organized the more than 1,000 pages of feedback.

The data and observations gleaned from this survey affirm that Menlo is an outstanding institution. The School received feedback from parents in both divisions that Menlo is fulfilling its values in being a challenging, engaging, and joyful school. This doesn't happen by accident. Our strength comes from continual self-examination and the desire to make improvements where necessary. As such, we're pleased to discuss our key strengths as well as areas that were identified as opportunities for us to improve. The feedback will guide us as we shape the implementation of our strategic plan.



AREAS OF STRENGTH

Overall, your responses demonstrated profound support for the overall impact of the School and our efforts to fulfill its mission (see figure 1 on page 5 for a snapshot). Menlo should be proud of this. Of particular note were four key strengths.

Excellence of the Faculty

At Menlo, we believe students realize their potential through strong relationships with dynamic teachers who challenge and nurture, who are passionate about the material they teach, and who inspire enthusiasm in their students. With this at our core, it comes as no surprise that parents have seen our exceptional faculty as a consistent strength of the School for a very long time. In fact, it invariably heads the list of what parents view as great about Menlo.

Our teachers keep students engaged and challenged by bringing learning to life in their classrooms. In the last two years, we have been working on expanding interdisciplinary projects and in-depth exploration. Students in Marc Allard's Upper School design course, for example, recently worked with the School's architect on the design of the new cafeteria and Student Life Center. Three teams presented their ideas and plans to the administration.

This was a great example of students turning their learning experience into a practical, real-world application. The project reinforced many of the values we hope to deepen in our strategic planning work: design thinking, team-based problem solving, and the ability to articulate and sell ideas. Similar work is occurring daily in our Middle School classes. The Seventh Grade's "Right On, Dude" project is a shining example of interdisciplinary work. This work is transformative in

"The main draw of Menlo for us was high teacher quality and high academic standards coupled with the forward thinking and creative approach to learning. In addition, we valued all the other opportunities Menlo has to offer."
— survey respondent



that it fosters the kind of learning that we value, and it is exceptional because it's led by forward-thinking, creative, and passionate teachers.

One of our core strategic goals centers around maintaining faculty excellence. Professional development, evaluation, salary and benefits, and retention are at the forefront of these goals. We're pleased with the progress we've made in several of these areas, which will help us attract the best teachers at the national level. As we've already shared with you, we've secured a Menlo-owned apartment complex to provide housing for some faculty and staff in a very demanding market. We've also recently added a rental listing application to our [website](#), where families can let us know about any available housing they'd like to rent to faculty and staff (in-law units, pool houses, apartments, spare rooms, etc.).

Academic Excellence

Your strong endorsement of our academic programs tells us we are on the right track at Menlo; not only do we strive to get our students into the colleges that are the right fit for them, more importantly, we are preparing them for success *in* college and *beyond*. We are educating them to be excellent thinkers, creators, and doers in life. This is a core reason why this school exists, and its excellence in educating students who are curious, innovative, and love learning is a foundational strength. The survey feedback indicates that you appreciate Menlo's challenging academic curriculum. In fact, 96 percent of you agreed that Menlo fosters academic excellence.

Through enthusiastic survey (as well as anecdotal) feedback from our alumni and parents with students in college, we hear that their Menlo education gave them the tools needed to succeed. Students in particular tell us that Menlo prepared them to write well, problem solve, manage their time and workloads, and reach out to their professors. (See figure 2 on page 5.)

Breadth of Opportunity

The breadth of programs and wide-ranging activities available to Menlo students also clearly registered with you as one of the School's core strengths. The academic, co-curricular, artistic, and athletic programs at Menlo are more robust than those of most similarly sized schools, and we hear regularly from students and very clearly from parents in the survey that this is one of the things that makes the Menlo experience truly exceptional. Beyond our traditional offerings of arts and athletics, families also noted the quality of offerings such as Knight School, Mock Trial, and M-BEST. Middle School families especially touted the benefits of having athletics programs during the school day.

A Safe and Welcoming Environment

We received widespread feedback from 97 percent of respondents that Menlo is a safe and welcoming environment for students and their families. These responses were gratifying to see. Menlo has long focused on the safety and well-being of our students, and it's heartening to see that our efforts to create a more inclusive environment are earning praise. The meaningful connections between students and teachers and coaches coupled with our emphasis on high-touch make Menlo unique. We get to know our students. We know their strengths, their passions, and how to inspire their potential. And, this makes our students feel safe and happy here.

We will continue to work to nurture our student-centered, respectful school culture. We are deepening our efforts around fostering student feelings of belonging, as students are the core of who we are as a school and a community. The Open Session program during Advocacy in both divisions and the newly-launched Community Circle conversations in the Upper School give students a safe and supportive space to explore topics related to social-emotional issues, societal issues, and education.

“The experience at Menlo is very student-centered. There is a true relationship and partnership between all the important people involved in the educational experience including faculty, administrators, parents, coaches, and arts teachers.”
— survey respondent

AREAS FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT

While there were four areas that were the targets of needed focus and improvement, we were pleased that there were no real surprises in the data. The themes were consistent with those raised throughout the strategic planning process: student load and balance, diversity and inclusivity, college counseling, and teaching variability. We suspect these are areas that can strike an emotional chord for parents, especially in an era where we see heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the world into which our students will enter as young adults.

Student Load and Balance

The issues of student load, their ability to focus, and the stress that they experience as a result were articulated concerns. When asked about the challenge of the academic program at Menlo School, 78 percent of you indicated it was “about right” while 16 percent said that it is “too much.” The issue of homework load was more divisive, with 30 percent reporting that it is “too much” while 62 percent reported that it was “about right.” We will continue to look closely at our calibration of rigor, course load, and amount of homework.

As our academic program has grown in strength, we’re seeing more and more students choosing to take advantage of our robust offerings. A broad program, however, can lead to students feeling over-extended if they overestimate their ability or the need to partake in many of the opportunities that exist. To be clear, we are seeing this more in the Upper School than in the Middle School and want to be precise with our conclusions. While we know that Menlo is not alone in experiencing this issue, the need to help students develop confidence and provide places for them to distinguish themselves is certainly something the School will continue to examine going forward.



We are optimistic about some of the efforts the School is making around building students’ capacity to handle stress and load, such as a mindfulness initiative being undertaken in both divisions, homework breaks over school holidays, as well as the work the School is doing to strengthen the web of support we have for students, both academic and social-emotional.

Enhancing the student experience is a central component of our developing strategic plan. We are looking to re-envision the curriculum to more fully integrate interdisciplinary, project-based learning with knowledge-building courses to deepen students’ understanding and love of learning. We are also committed to re-imagining the School schedule to accommodate new learning experiences, encourage faculty collaboration, and promote greater balance, well-being, and joy for all students.

Stay tuned—we’ll have more to say about this later in the year.

Diversity and Inclusivity

It is clear that many parents view the goal of a more diversified Menlo as an educational imperative. Students are graduating into a world that will demand their ability to work with people different from themselves, and the capacity to do so is essential. The work that Menlo’s Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Angela Birts, has been doing in developing and, starting last year, implementing a multi-year strategic plan for us has already seen positive results. This school year began with a faculty retreat led by Robert Greene, a Senior Consultant and Leadership Coach whose expertise lies in helping independent schools grapple with this issue. Mr. Greene has already returned to the campus to work with our senior administrative team, and he will be back later in the fall to continue to work with our faculty and staff.

We should also highlight the work being done by Beth Bishop and her team in Admissions. They are working daily to attract a more diverse student body to Menlo. Similarly, in the area of Global Programs and specifically the Menlo Abroad program, Peter Brown and Marissa LaValette are committed to establishing programs that enable students to have relationships with people, places, and cultures to which they might not otherwise have access. Our aim is that this will continue to develop the kind of empathy, humility, and understanding that are essential traits for our students to embody. It is important to acknowledge that diversity and inclusion are complex



ambitions and ones that are not realized quickly. This will be an initiative that Menlo will need to pursue consistently going forward.

College Counseling

The third area for continued growth and focus has to do with Menlo's College

Counseling Program. In the survey, 67 percent of Upper School families agree that Menlo provides a quality college counseling program, while 13 percent disagreed (20 percent didn't have an opinion). Themes of concern indicate that the School should be doing more to manage the anxiety around applying to college, offer more guidance in putting together an appropriate college list, and look into ways to further free up counselors to spend more time with their counselees.

The program also received many accolades. Respondents with students in the College Counseling Program said it provides them with good information, and Upper School families said that the college counseling presentations are the best meetings the School holds all year, even exceeding the ever-popular Back-to-School Night. Respondents with seniors also identified our counselors' strengths as being responsive to inquiries, getting timely and helpful information to families, and working hard to get to know their students.

Some of the feedback on this emotionally-charged issue might just have to do with managing expectations around college placement rather than the actual College Counseling Program. And we need to communicate better some of the services we provide and things we do particularly well. For example, the *College Counseling Handbook* has been touted by many professionals as an exemplary guidebook; the "College Knowledge Flipboard Magazine" is a uniquely curated resource; the summer essay writing workshops as well as the Saturday open office hours are truly above and beyond for the office to provide.

All that said, we take the feedback seriously. Though Menlo students are gaining admission to an incredible list of colleges and universities, there is clearly more to the process than the end result, and we are looking at using the parent feedback to make improvements in the program.

Teacher Variability


As in past years, the survey responses from parents in both the Middle and Upper School expressed more concern on teacher variability than we think there should be. While initiatives like the newly-implemented faculty evaluation process for both divisions and the work in the Upper School on consistency of expectations and grading between teachers of the same courses are excellent efforts focused on this very concern, both are too new for us to expect to see significant tangible improvements yet. The School is fully committed to continuing these efforts and will be closely watching this trend over time.

In closing, while we have spent some time focusing on several areas for growth, it is important to return to what is core: Menlo is a wonderful school that is serving its students extremely well. Menlo is a dynamic, thoughtful, academically excellent institution that is preparing our students for the world they will find both in college and beyond in ways that go well beyond a standard, traditional education.

We take your feedback very seriously and are committed to keeping you updated on the progress we are making in the areas that were outlined in this KnightLine. On Wednesday, October 14, at 7:00 pm, please join us for the MSPA meeting, where we will be on hand to review the survey findings more deeply and answer questions that you send in. You can submit questions in advance [here](#). Additionally, you will hear more from us across the year on our progress on the themes outlined above. We thank you for your thoughtfulness and help in making Menlo an even better place for our students.

Sincerely,


Than Healy, Head of School


John Schafer, Upper School Director


La Vina Lowery, Middle School Director

Snapshot of Results from the Last Three Parent Surveys (figure 1)

(1=strongly agree, 4=strongly disagree)

Menlo Mission & Values (Parent Responses*)	2015	2012	2009
Menlo fosters academic excellence	1.23	1.41	1.37
Menlo helps students stretch themselves and raise challenging questions	1.36	1.49	1.51
Menlo supports students to take progressively more responsibility	1.38	1.48	1.59
Menlo develops strong student-teacher relationships	1.45	1.63	1.76
Menlo builds independent and creative thinking among students	1.56	1.55	1.98
Menlo School provides students with high expectations balanced with encouragement and support	1.63	1.65	1.75
Menlo fosters courage, integrity, and ethical behavior	1.64	1.59	1.82
Menlo fosters joy of learning in students	1.70	1.61	1.78
Menlo encourage students to lead healthful lives	1.78	1.79	1.97
Menlo develops in students a commitment to purposes larger than themselves	1.83	1.79	2.04
Menlo helps students appreciate the richness of diversity	2.06	2.15	2.40

*A comparison of data from the past three parent surveys.

How Menlo School Prepares for College* (figure 2)

	Strongly/ Somewhat Agree	Strongly/ Somewhat Disagree
Menlo's academic programs prepared my student(s) for college admissions	97%	3%
Menlo's faculty and staff prepared my student(s) to advocate for himself/herself at college	95%	2%
Menlo prepared my student(s) to take responsibility for his or her learning	95%	1%
Menlo prepared my student(s) to utilize the resources of the school he/she is attending	89%	2%

*Answered by 22% of parents (108 families) who have a student who has graduated from Menlo and gone to college.

KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website periodically, 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.

