

From the
UPPER SCHOOL
DIRECTOR

John Schafer



Ensuring an Innovative, Challenging, and Relevant Curriculum

In the coming weeks, we will be meeting with Upper School students and parents to talk about course selection for the upcoming school year. As part of these conversations, we encourage 9th and 10th graders not only to plot out next year's courses but also to start thinking about their interests in subsequent years, as there are many routes through Menlo's curriculum. With this in mind, I thought now would be an opportune time to share the approach we take as a school in reviewing and revamping our curriculum to ensure it remains the innovative, engaging, and relevant program students have always enjoyed at Menlo.

We've long sought to create an academic program that not only sparks our students' curiosity and love of learning but also prepares them for college and life beyond Menlo. We truly want learning at Menlo to be transformational—not something students just do for a grade or test score. And, we know students are most likely to engage deeply when they help shape their learning, rather than simply responding to a teacher or a textbook.

This thinking has become increasingly clear since the opening of Whitaker Lab a decade ago. The model of teaching and learning that happens there—teacher as coach, student directed, learning by doing, intense iterating and problem solving—has proven to be super motivating for kids and helped us crystallize our teaching philosophy in other areas because it so clearly works. It's inspired us to emphasize depth over breadth and to prioritize coursework that

encourages student voice and choice. This approach allows for engaging, topical questions, critical thinking, problem solving, projects and original research or creation, and rich skill building across our curriculum.

Our faculty members play a lead role in designing, evaluating, and refreshing our curriculum. They know our students well and see what works in our classrooms. They are also continually thinking about what's happening in the world as well as what the future may hold for students and the skills they'll need to thrive. Fueled by their ideas, expertise, and feedback, we regularly conceive of and incorporate curricular enhancements to ensure our academic program is firmly in the "real world" and not just something we roll over year after year.

We are quite proud of the high-caliber, wide-ranging offerings in our [course catalog](#). It features courses not commonly offered at many high schools, like Advanced Topics in Physics: Quantum Mechanics and Electromagnetism and Relativity (H), App Design & Development, U.S. Foreign Policy, Applied Entrepreneurship, and Menlo IP, as well as an impressive slate of senior English electives and a diverse cross section of history/social science electives for our 11th and 12th graders, many with Honors options. A number of these classes were added in recent years based on our continual curriculum review process. The additions we've made to our catalog have given our students more choices in charting their paths through Menlo and have been enthusiastically received.

Another curricular shift we're gradually incorporating is to replace outdated AP courses with more engaging, relevant Advanced Topics (AT) offerings and increase our electives and Honors options. We've found that the AP standardized curriculum can be constraining while our own AT and Honors courses provide more opportunities for deeper exploration and dynamic interdisciplinary learning and are ultimately more interesting and responsive to our students. We want to take the best parts of what we've learned from teaching that curriculum and, in the years to come, build on it in exciting ways that will benefit our students. So over time, as our excellent teachers envision courses that will better serve our students, we will replace AP courses in our

catalog with those new, more relevant classes. (For those students who still want to take the AP tests each spring, we will continue to provide that opportunity.)

This isn't really new for Menlo—we began rethinking some of our higher-level courses over a decade ago. We moved away from AP Biology because we felt it emphasized lectures, memorization, and test preparation. We then expanded our catalog to include AT Biology, Biotech, and Neuroscience, all of which offer our students more meaningful research and hands-on, lab-based learning opportunities where they are actually doing science. More recently, we moved away from AP U.S. History, which is notorious for its breakneck pace and coverage demands, and replaced it with an Honors version of sophomore American History that provides more time and space for current events, primary source analysis, and a research project. In the next few years, in lieu of AP classes, we have plans to expand our Honors and AT course offerings across other disciplines, which will further expand our students' course selection options and give them more opportunities to explore their interests and delve deeper into their passions.

I know our faculty is excited about the possibilities that lie ahead, and the new courses they launch, whenever they are ready to do so, will be characteristically fantastic! As our English Department Chair has shared with me, "We are thrilled to build all the best parts of the AP experiences into an even more cohesive upper level curriculum that takes students on an intensive, relevant, and exciting journey through literary studies."

Menlo is also not alone in this thinking in relation to our peer schools, but we are late to this kind of transition. The majority of our independent school peers in the Bay Area, as well as many nationally, migrated away from the AP curriculum years (and, in some cases, decades) ago. I have



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heard from many of them that their students are enjoying and benefitting from the new courses and their faculty members are inspired by the opportunity to engage and challenge students in new ways.

As you would expect, anything we do in our curriculum we do in consultation with the colleges and universities to which our students apply to ensure that any changes will further distinguish our students and enhance the strength of their applications to college. As a dean from one highly selective university told us, "You have this amazing curriculum that kids should be taking advantage of. Why would you want your kids to look like every other kid in the country taking a bunch of APs when they could distinguish themselves by taking your unique classes?"

You may have heard us say, we believe great institutions never arrive but are constantly in a state of becoming. We are excited about this continuing evolution of our curriculum and the ways it will further engage, challenge, and benefit our students. Given what we've learned over the last decade-plus of doing this work, I can anticipate some logical and normal questions that we might get from families and students. I hope I can answer some of these questions by saying that we've been doing this work—in a thoughtful, organic, responsive way—for a long time, and we will continue to do so.

We look forward to sharing more with you and unveiling specific details about our curriculum at the upcoming course enrollment nights: March 2, 6:00 pm (on Zoom), for 10th and 11th grade parents, and March 7, 6:00 pm (on Zoom), for 9th grade parents.

John Schafer
Upper School Director

