

## Lifelong Learning: Menlo's Commitment to Professional Development

FROM

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Walk into any classroom on Menlo's campus, and chances are you'll find signs of wonder: captivated students, eyes wide open, ears perked up, synapses firing.



It's called transcendent thinking, explained Professor of Education at the USC Rossier School of Education, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, EdD at a Menlo faculty professional development day in November. And it not only makes the classroom experience more engaging but also predicts young adult life satisfaction. "Building meaning builds teens' brains," shared Immordino-Yang. As students understand the "why" behind the "how" and find purpose in the material, they develop the agency to move back and forth between interconnected neural pathways: social, emotional, cultural, and cognitive. It's the difference between a transactional and transformational education.

At Menlo, we are constantly reassessing and recalibrating our pedagogy to stay relevant, responsive, and meaningful. Our dynamic, innovative program empowers engaged learners to discover their best selves. And thanks to Menlo's intentional investments in professional and personal growth, our teachers are on as enlightening a journey of self-actualization as

their students. That's where the magic happens: we are all lifelong learners, leading by example.

In a recent parent survey, which you'll hear more about in the coming weeks, the number one favorite thing about Menlo by an overwhelming majority was the faculty. "Our faculty continues to be enviably strong and just gets stronger through an investment in professional development and ongoing conversations about how we can best serve our students," shared Than Healy in this year's State of the School address.

As the Upper School Dean of Teaching and Learning, I am entrusted with facilitating opportunities for the adults on campus to simultaneously expand their skills and selves. Here's how.



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## A State of Becoming

Than often talks about how great institutions never fully arrive, but are constantly in a state of becoming. “Rather than resting in the comfort of knowing that our metrics are strong, we instead continuously look for ways to improve, to reflect, and to pursue continued relevance for our students,” he said.

And that’s where I come in. I curate a monthly digest of opportunities and sources of inspiration, some specific to particular disciplines and others more big-picture, future of education-focused. Through a comprehensive onboarding and orientation process, robust mentoring structures, classroom observations, and formal faculty reviews, I strive to establish the conditions, structures, relationships, and opportunities for people to feel recognized and supported. So if I do this job well, it’s laying the foundation for teachers to do their very best work and continue to thrive and be excited and motivated throughout their whole careers.

The value that Menlo places on professional development is a significant draw for prospective teachers who prioritize continuing education, innovation, and discovery. And it is also an invitation to stay awhile. This year, we are losing just nine people who work directly with students as faculty and coaches—the lowest number in over a decade. Three of those individuals alone have dedicated a total of 77 years to Menlo School.

## Leading by Example

Having been at Menlo since 2000, I understand the importance of keeping things fresh. After 19 years teaching French, Upper School Dean John Schafer challenged me to develop a new English elective. “Think of the things you love,” he advised. A self-proclaimed Francophile who has taken a cooking class at the Cordon Bleu and art history lessons at the Louvre, I immediately dreamt up a course called “Cafe Society: Paris in the 1920s.” I also designed a class called “Multicultural London” that I taught for several



years before deciding to look for inspiration anew, on my very own bookshelves. Noticing a proliferation of titles related to themes of simple pleasures or small joys, I asked myself, “What is here that I could share?” And thus “A Literary Exploration of Delight” was born.

The evolutionary, passion-driven nature of my Menlo career has had a profound impact on my approach to my current role as the Upper School Dean of Teaching and Learning. I encourage colleagues to keep stretching for different goals in a culture that I hope feels supportive and exciting and honors their unique gifts.

## Learning Together

One of my observations from this year is that an increasing number of colleagues are attending conferences and workshops together. Twenty Menlo staff members attended the NAIS People of Color Conference in November, joining 8,000 independent school allies from across the country who share a commitment to equity and justice in education and organizational development. In January, four Menlo faculty members attended the Future of Education Technology conference to explore cutting edge advancements in EdTech and AI. That same month, Middle and Upper School science teachers met with a consultant to tackle some existential questions: What’s our mission for this department and for science education at Menlo? What’s the portrait of a graduate through the lens of science education? What types

of scientific thinking and skills will our students take with them? In March, Upper School Deans joined Assistant Director Adam Gelb at the CultureLab conference to learn new tools to understand, articulate, and design pathways to shift school culture in positive ways.

And the learning doesn't end when the school year does. This summer, Middle School math teachers will attend the Building Thinking Classrooms workshop, after reading Peter Liljedahl's guide on how to put students at the center of their own learning and entirely shifting their math pedagogy as a result. Meanwhile, three Middle and Upper school teachers will attend the Learning and the Brain Conference, leveraging the latest research in learning and cognitive sciences to enhance students' inner strengths.

## Teaching Each Other

As important as it is to expand our horizons through exposure to off-campus offerings, it can be equally as powerful to come back, connect with colleagues, and discover the throughlines between divisions and disciplines.

In March, the Middle and Upper School World Language Departments gathered to share what they had learned at various workshops they attended throughout the year. They presented two sessions to each other and percolated in all the good ideas, finding ways to build community and continuity throughout the 6-12 experience.

This proved to be the perfect pilot for our All-School Professional Development Day on March 11, where Menlo faculty, staff, and coaches had the opportunity to choose from 21 inspiring, colleague-led workshops. From "The Art of Listening" and "Helping Struggling Students Do Hard Things," to "Successful Project-Based Lesson Plans" and "How to Talk to AI," the day filled both professional and personal buckets, fostering respect, skill building, and collaboration.

The biggest takeaways? There are a lot of smart people here doing really creative things, and people love learning from each other. In a session on promoting student-to-student appreciation, a variety of teachers, coaches, and administrators gathered on couches scattered throughout the room. While each may play a distinct role and interact with students differently, building a culture of kindness is clearly a shared value. Similarly, the attendees for "Launching Your First Student Book Club" included English teachers, science teachers, history teachers, math teachers, and world language teachers. It was precisely the type of interdisciplinary interaction that I was hoping for out of the day.

## A Love of Learning

In addition to our resident experts, three outside speakers came to share their insights with us this year. Robert Evans, Ed.D., clinical and organizational psychologist and school consultant offered strategies to reinforce our values of respect, kindness, empathy, compassion, self-advocacy, independence, and community post-COVID. Faculty learned about mindset, resilience, and gratitude from Tim Bono, Faculty, Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. And as mentioned previously, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, EdD offered a neuroscientific glimpse into the interconnectedness of emotional and cognitive processes.

Because our school puts such significant emphasis on engaging minds and hearts, our faculty, staff, and coaches are perpetually honing their crafts. When we share a love of learning with our students, we cultivate curiosity, collaboration, and transcendent thinking that goes well beyond the classroom. And isn't that what a Menlo education is all about?

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