Character Building
TRAINING FOR SUCCESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Many social critics and school reformers have recently faulted American schools for their failure to teach skills and behaviors important for success in the 21st century. According to them, tradition-bound educators are failing to provide American students with what they will need to be competitive in a shifting global economy. In their view, American high school graduates arrive at college bereft of the academic training and resilience needed to adapt to the rigors of undergraduate life. Fortunately, most Newark Academy graduates continue to report academic success and social integration at a range of excellent colleges in the U.S. and Europe. Nonetheless, questions about what we teach or fail to teach are being discussed at public and private schools with particular attention to what have been termed “21st-century” or “non-cognitive” skills.
To a significant degree, the addition of "new" skills to the list of expectations of what schools should teach reflects shifting perceptions about what our students need in order to thrive in a technology-centered global economy. Parents and business leaders are anxious about the future and wonder if our schools are doing enough to prepare students for it. Completing a first semester of calculus, speaking passable French, or writing a cogent analysis of Joyce may have been enough for 20th-century high school students to demonstrate their preparedness for college, but today's students are expected both to do more in traditional disciplines and to demonstrate competency in other areas. Some of these new skills could be described as traits of character: grit, resilience, integrity and leadership. Other skills such as problem solving, adaptability, collaboration and digital literacy are linked to the fast-changing world of technology in which people must work effectively on teams and projects that change quickly. How is Newark Academy responding to these shifts?

In important ways, we are steadfastly continuing what we have been doing well for generations. Building character has long been central to Newark Academy's mission. In addition to the habits of mind students develop by meeting high academic standards, they learn valuable lessons by playing on athletic teams, working in the arts, running clubs, and engaging in community service. These activities serve as laboratories for collaboration and leadership as well as fertile ground for the lifelong friendships that so many alumni cherish. Participation in peer-led projects also helps students learn to bounce back from disappointment and failure.

Although many of the so-called 21st-century skills have long been implicitly promoted at Newark Academy, the faculty is now exploring ways to teach them more explicitly. One central question concerns assessment. Since we assess what we value and value what we assess, it follows that when certain skills fall outside of traditional academic disciplines, we must adjust the way we assess students. How do we encourage creative problem solving or divergent thinking in a high-stakes academic environment in which a safe path to the right answer may deter the pursuit of original work or novel solutions? Certainly SATs and APs don't assess students' creativity or teamwork, so schools like Newark Academy must lead the charge to incorporate programs and experiences that develop skills and behaviors that we value, even if they fall outside of what the College Board measures. How then do we devise measures of performance that push students toward teamwork and originality as well as the tried and true traditional skills?

Several recent changes in our academic program stretch students in novel ways. The required immersion program takes students into an unfamiliar context in which they must adapt and apply newly learned skills; many return from these experiences with greater self-confidence and broadened perspectives on the world. The original research required for the IB extended essay and the portfolio that all eighth-grade students assemble for their spring teacher-parent conferences are curricular opportunities for sustained self-reflective work. They also highlight our students' impressive oral and written communication skills. Our teachers and coaches have already taken first steps to rethink how we assess skills in certain areas, and more adjustments will follow. In Middle School athletics, for example, coaches are now using a rubric that identifies not only ability and sportsmanship, but also attitude and daily commitment. The faculty recently heard from an expert who is working with teachers across the country to develop scientific ways to measure non-cognitive skills. Departments are exploring how to integrate those skills into existing semester courses, capstone trips, and June Term.

This is both an unsettling and exciting time for education in America. Newark Academy students continue to benefit from the academic strength of the faculty as well as their willingness to experiment and innovate.