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Listening to a Student

Matthew Spigelman was a senior at Fieldston in 1998 when he decided that the school’s curriculum had a fundamental flaw. The school’s faculty designed a myriad of interesting and rigorous courses, but students were reluctant to take them because they did not have the Advanced Placement (AP) label. So Spigelman wrote a paper for his English class arguing that the school should drop AP. “While the goal of AP courses is to prepare students for the AP test, the goal of Fieldston-specific courses is to learn for learning’s sake,” he wrote. Spigelman added that, “Courses specific to Fieldston have their curricula generated by Fieldston teachers. Thus, Fieldston teachers bring enthusiasm to the Fieldston-generated courses not generally found in AP courses.” Spigelman also commented on the paradox of offering fact-based survey courses as the capstone of the curriculum. “It is ironic,” he wrote, “that the top students, who will be trying to take the most specialized courses available in college, are taking the most general courses available in high school largely because the course titles are preceded by the letters ‘AP.’” As it happened, many of Fieldston’s faculty and staff agreed with Spigelman, and three years later, Fieldston dropped AP.

Commitment to Community

Fieldston’s full name is Ethical Culture Fieldston School, an acknowledgment of its historic ties to the Society for Ethical Culture. Via its Ethics Department, Fieldston has one of the strongest programs of service-learning in the nation, including courses such as Adolescent Social Psychology, Ethics in Sports, Social Justice in Practical Matters of Difference. A student-run Community Service Advisory Board plans a wide array of service programs, and each student does at least 60 hours of service.

Fieldston School

“We Put Learning In The Hands Of Students”

A student at Fieldston School recently received an email from famed psychologist Philip Zimbardo. “Lizzy,” who takes Paul Church’s Advanced Topics Biology class, had contacted Zimbardo while preparing to lead a discussion of his well-known article “The Banality of Heroism.” “I was really shocked to hear from him, but it was a fun experience,” she said. “It gave me ownership of the project.”
Students correspond with leading scholars on a regular basis in AT Biology, which replaced Advanced Placement Biology when Fieldston dropped AP in 2001. While Church sets the overall direction of the class, students choose the papers that they will present and (at Church’s urging) contact the authors to get deeper insight. Church also requires students to research and design all of the labs for the course. “It’s so much more interesting than memorizing and regurgitating,” said Church. “I think I’d go crazy if we were doing the same 12 labs every year.” One recent student-designed lab was “The Effect of Peer Pressure on Middle Schoolers,” in which students chose five subjects and four ringers to participate in an experiment. On the surface, the experiment was about whether the subjects could recognize shapes in rapid-fire succession. But the real purpose was not to test those abilities, but to gauge the reaction of the subjects when the ringers began recognizing unfamiliar shapes that they had been coached to expect.

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Rather than covering the familiar canon of introductory biology – where all the interesting issues are solved – AT Biology brings students to the frontiers of science and then asks hard questions. A recent student-led discussion probed the neurological differences between short term and long term memory, but soon morphed into a heated debate about the desirability of a hypothetical pill that could block short-term memories while preserving long-term ones.

Church frequently gets emails from former students. One now at University of Chicago reported reading “Invariant Visual Representation By Single Neurons in the Human Brain” for a class on Brain and Thought, a paper she had also read in Church’s class. “Thanks for introducing me to such cool stuff in high school,” she wrote.

AT Biology is only one example of the cool stuff at Fieldston. In every corner of the curriculum, students play an important role in shaping their own education. “Students are in constant dialogue with us about what they do, as opposed to the teachers telling them what to do and getting on with it,” said Hugo Mahabir, Dean of Faculty.

Each year, the school chooses a Summer Book, to be read by the entire community. In typical Fieldston style, the choice is made by a committee of approximately ten students, with input from two faculty members. “Mad fighting over books,” is how Dotty Hanson, the Form V (eleventh grade) Dean, describes the committee. Each Summer Book is the subject of day-long focus during the school
year, often highlighted by a visit from the author. Recent choices have ranged from *A Long Way Gone*, a memoir of a child soldier in Sierra Leone, to Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*.

Advanced work at Fieldston brings a dizzying array of choices. Instead of fact-covering, discipline-bound surveys, Fieldston’s advanced courses are deep and interdisciplinary. Examples include Native American Literature, Meteorology, Advanced Topics in Calculus BC, The Rise of the Right in Contemporary American Politics, and Inventing Gotham: New York City and the American Dream. The work at Fieldston is exceptionally challenging, but students don’t mind because they get to follow their interests. “My friends at other schools tend to complain about their classes,” said one student. “It’s not about the learning for them. It’s about getting into college. Students at Fieldston sign up for classes because they love the subject.”

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Fieldston places strong emphasis on projects, presentations, experiments, and collaborative activities. “The ability of our students to devise a process for an experiment and carry out that procedure is essential to our program,” said Bob Cairo, Assistant Principal and Chemistry Teacher. “We put learning in the hands of students, and they have choice in what they do.” In grade twelve, 60-90 students per year drop a class to complete an interdisciplinary Senior Project. In tenth grade, students participate in the National History Day program, for which they produce web sites, Powerpoint presentations, and videos on topics such as “Sigmund Freud in America” and “The 54th Massachusetts Regiment.” According to teacher Jim Cullen, History Day helps to explode “the myth that there is this thing called U.S. History.” Just as history is lived from a particular point of view, so too must it be studied from a point of view. “Students learn history as narrative,” said Cullen.

Fieldston embraces the fundamental idea that human learning is created by individuals rather than handed down from an objective authority. Learning at Fieldston is a collaboration in which teacher-learners and student-learners share a process of discovery. Said Cullen, “Teachers must be in it for themselves as well. It provides students with the sense that education is varied and rich. It’s like real life.”

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