



Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy's Approach to Upper School:
A Six-Year Christ-Centered College Preparatory Experience

By Dean Nicholas, Ph.D.

Our world is changing. Major shifts are occurring in every field and we experience them daily. Technological advances, market dynamics, political realities, globalization, all have radically reshaped the world in which we live.¹ The realities and dynamics our current students will have to navigate after their formal education ends are like nothing we have ever seen before. If one considers the way the world has changed even in the past decade, the rapid acceleration in everything leaves one breathless. Yet as it has been so often stated, most educational systems in our country continue to educate and train young people to be successful in a 19th and 20th century environment.² So the question is how do we create a school where we can prepare adolescents for a future in which they will actually live?

Exacerbating this situation to an even greater degree is the culture shift in the way we prepare young people for the future. We observe the “helicopter parent” who endlessly hovers, taking care of every need and removing every obstacle in the path of their child. Parents fear that without providing every advantage and opportunity, their child will trail their peers and be disadvantaged in gaining college acceptance and success in the world post college. So parents help in every way they can, sometimes going as far as doing the work on behalf of the child to make sure things are done right. Then we hear the anecdotes of business leaders bemoaning the lack of work ethic and drive among their young employees who expect accolades and promotion without earning their way. It should not come as a surprise. And the saddest part of all is the emotional and psychological strain on our youth. The levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout that our young people experience across the country are at unprecedented levels.

In our own attempt to address this cultural crisis, we encouraged our parents, faculty, and administrators alike to read Julie Lythcott-Haim’s cultural critique *How to Raise an Adult*³ as a catalyst to begin talking about the issues she raises. We are not immune to the dilemma. But in our own attempt, we began addressing aspects of this issue two years ago when we made the deliberate shift from an elementary, middle, and high school to a Lower School and an Upper School.

The reason we began an Upper School was because of the issues related to having fifth through eighth graders in the same program. Anyone who has dealt with students in this age group knows that the cognitive, emotional, and physical differences between 5th and 8th grade are immense. To create programming or a culture that could successfully span that age difference was impossible. By making a change, we were able to create two separate programs and cultures even though they reside in the same building. So beginning two years ago, we began a shift that would link our 7th and 8th graders with our 9th through 12th grade program. Now, despite being in separate buildings, we have a program that spans 7th through 12th grade and creates a single culture and ethos that prepares our students to learn, lead, and serve in a Christ-centered way in college and beyond. This document will describe our program and its philosophy, sharing the future of Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy.

With the creation of an Upper School, CHCA provides the only six-year Christ-centered college preparatory high school in the region. Beginning with the end in mind, we will prepare students to thrive in college and beyond. We will do this by creating an opportunity for students to thrive in a “further faster” world. We will allow them to pursue their passions and foster a love of learning that goes beyond an education of checking boxes and jumping through hoops. We

¹ For an enlightening (if not mind boggling) picture of the way our world is changing before our eyes, see Thomas L. Friedman’s, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: FSG Books, 2016).

² See Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith’s, *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

³ (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

intend to raise up emotionally mature and healthy young people. And through all of this, we desire for our students to be theologically rooted in a Christ-centered worldview. We believe that this is an education that not only prepares them for college but for the challenges of an ever-changing world.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMMING

CHCA has built a strong academic reputation as a college preparatory school with rigorous programs in 7th and 8th as well as in 9th-12th grades. The creation of an Upper School only strengthens our program. We have created academic departments that now span grades 7-12 with a single Department Head for each curricular area. In this way, we ensure a seamless scope and sequence in our curricula with regular departmental meetings to align our courses and move our pedagogy forward through best practices.

With the formation of the Upper School starting at 7th grade, we have begun awarding high school credit in grades 7-8 for certain classes that are at a high school level. Currently, Algebra 1 and Geometry receive one credit, and Chinese 1A, 1B, Latin 1A, 1B, Spanish 1A, 1B, and Health all receive .5 credits. So rising 9th graders could potentially already have 3.5 high school credits. While these courses are listed on the transcript, they are recorded Pass/Fail so that younger students are not concerned about a permanent grade point average. We want students to stretch themselves if they are ready without the worry of affecting their GPA.

One of the skills that has historically set apart a CHCA graduate is the ability to write well. With the formation of the Upper School, we are putting an even greater focus on this area. Our students' ability to communicate well is critical.⁴ So beginning in the 7th grade, every day all students take English Composition. We believe that our students need to be writing daily to hone their skills. In the 8th grade, all students will either have regular or advanced English Composition. Alongside English Composition, each student will also study English Literature every other day, giving them more time to complete reading assignments. With this foundation, all Upper School students will be well equipped to write for college and beyond.

Another emphasis in the Upper School is to teach our students to think critically. Adapting the curriculum of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, our students cultivate “fair-minded critical thinking—thinking which embodies intellectual empathy, intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, and intellectual responsibility.”⁵ These traits are cultivated in the 8th grade Christian Studies course Faith and Reason, but permeate all the curricula. In the future, we will be training our entire faculty more extensively in teaching Critical Thinking skills. However, already we are seeing the effects on our students as they progress through the program.

Often times when thinking about secondary education, course work is scripted due to a required course of study. While the Ohio Department of Education and the school's academic policies require a certain number of courses within the 25 credit hours for graduation, there are ways for students to pursue their own passions and interests. We desire for students to “own” their learning, customizing their studies to follow their interests. If students accrue credits in the 7th and 8th grades and through an ever-growing summer school program, a student could have very few requirements left by senior year. We encourage our students to consider less traditional course of study for their senior year. Some of our students create independent research opportunities. Beginning with a sophomore class entitled Research and Leadership, students can create a research program that they carry out their junior and senior year. Students have executed research studies in aquaponic systems, foster care, medical research, horticulture, and

⁴ See Wagner & Dintersmith pp. 105-13 for their case for a greater emphasis on writing in American education.

⁵ www.criticalthinking.org

groundwater contamination to name a few examples. These studies have led to nationally published articles and presentations at professional meetings. Other students have taken on Senior Capstone projects such as building a dancing fountain, writing a history of the Baptist church in Havana, Cuba, studying peace building in Israel/Palestine, and exploring the culinary arts. A recent student even spent a semester studying in Shanghai, China where she learned Mandarin and taught English. These types of authentic learning experiences transform students, helping them see that the world is a classroom waiting to be engaged.

Another example of non-traditional learning is our Entrepreneurship Program. Students study business and entrepreneurship not from textbooks, but from managing and starting businesses. The Leaning Eagle Coffee Bar and The Blend Breakfast Bar are two full functioning student created, managed, and operated businesses on our campus. Students not only work as baristas and servers but also manage the entire business venture, including marketing tactics, measuring profitability, and supervising their classmates/employees. This year the students are also participating in the operation of the school Spirit Shop. This real world experience gives our students a sense of what it takes to create and run a business. Our 7th and 8th graders operate the Mini Cup (a more simplified extension of the Leaning Eagle) at Founders' Campus monthly, allowing them to become acquainted with the program in the earliest years of the Upper School.

When one considers non-traditional education, a signature program of the CHCA Upper School is Intersession. Intersession begins in 7th and 8th grades with Intersession: Change Our World. For one week in the fall, we take a break from the traditional classroom as Founders' Campus students participate in service learning. Our 7th graders all participate in a pre-set program, learning about their own character strengths and then exploring different ministries and outreaches around the Cincinnati area. The 8th graders choose from five different opportunities comprised of serving at a local ministry, an out of town ministry, or at Back2Back Ministries in Monterrey, Mexico. Our 9-12th graders participate in a two week intensive experiential learning opportunity in either a Winter Term (the first two weeks of January) or a May Term (last two weeks of May), depending on the year. The older students choose from one of approximately 25 different courses that comprise in depth explorations of a specific topic, service learning, educational travel, or cultural immersions.

SOCIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY PREPARED

The ethos of the Upper School is one of empowerment. We desire to help students grow socially and emotionally, creating an environment with adequate freedoms and responsibilities to prepare them for college life. Self-efficacy is one of the greatest traits we intend to build into our students. The ability to act on their own behalf, make decisions, manage themselves and their time, and self-advocate are all skills that we intend to foster. We regularly tell the students that this is not the teachers' and administrators' school but it is *our* school and we must create its culture together.

One of the first steps in creating this culture of responsibility and ownership at the Founders' Campus was the creation of Student Government for grades 7-8. Class leaders elected by their peers meet regularly to discuss school issues: from socials to dress code to class competitions to event planning. Class leaders seek the input of their classmates and bring concerns to administration. Our 7th and 8th grade students gain great experience in leadership, giving them a head start for the student body leadership roles on the MSL campus.

Another way we are building a culture of responsibility is with Student Directed Learning (7/8) and Personal Responsibility Time (9-12). Student Directed Learning (SDL) occurs the last period of the day at Founders' Monday through Thursday. Each student checks in at his or her SDL classroom for a 40-minute period. During this time, they can study quietly in their assigned room, go to one of the collaboration rooms to study in a group, attend the peer tutoring room to get help from National Junior Honor Society members, or make an appointment to get help from

a teacher or make up a quiz or test. All teachers are free during this time, overseeing an SDL, so that they can work with students who need extra help as they are getting started on their homework.

At the MSL campus, students have Personal Responsibility Time (PRT).⁶ We found that often times students went off to college and struggled managing their free time wisely. In high school, students have four minutes between bells. In college, students might have hours between classes. We needed to give students the opportunity to manage time. So each student has a PRT 4th, 5th, or 6th bell when the cafeteria is serving lunch. Students have a full 48-minute bell to eat lunch and use the time in whatever way they choose. Students can go to the collaboration space to study with a friend, begin homework, or work with a teacher who is free. They can visit the Leaning Eagle or the Blend, practice their instrument in a practice room, workout with our sports performance coach, play a pick up basketball game or badminton in the gym, socialize with friends, or schedule an off campus appointment. Seniors have off campus privileges. We no longer have traditional study halls because in the real world, we have to manage our time and space, deciding how and where we study best. We give students the opportunity to start learning this skill now before they are miles away from home with no supervision. This truly gives our campus a “college campus” feel. The transition for our graduates is much less drastic because of it.

It is because of this same philosophy that the Upper School has a dress code rather than a uniform. Unless one of our graduates attends a military academy, none of the schools where they matriculate has a uniform. We want our students to be able to express themselves through their dress, but to learn to do so appropriately and modestly. Again, this is a learning process for our students, but one that we believe is important for them developmentally.

CHRIST-CENTERED WORLDVIEW

Throughout the six years of Upper School, we seek to give students the foundation for a Christ-centered worldview.⁷ This perspective is developed through a number of avenues: the Christian Studies curriculum, theological integration across the curriculum, chapel programming, and service requirements.

Within the Christian Studies curriculum, students gain a thorough understanding of the Bible, theology, and Church history. Each course builds upon the one before to create a broad perspective of Christian Studies. In the 7th grade, students explore the teaching of the Gospels and the overarching theological categories, ending the course by writing a faith statement. In the 8th grade course, Faith and Reason, students begin the study of logic and critical thinking, asking questions about how to read a text carefully, evaluate evidence, and construct an argument. Then students apply these interpretive strategies to the Bible. In 9th grade Old and New Covenants, students survey the Bible from Genesis through Gospels, paying careful attention to the ancient cultures and backgrounds of the biblical world. The course traces salvation history through the meta narrative of the Bible. In 10th grade, students study History of Christianity. In this course, students survey the remainder of the New Testament first semester and Church history the second semester. This course culminates in a project where students visit five different churches from different denominations and traditions, analyzing the services and worship, comparing and contrasting them with their own faith tradition. In the 11th grade, students study Christian Thought and Spirituality. This course examines the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as sources for doing systematic theology. Students read a

⁶ The moniker *personal responsibility time* was adopted from Brebeuf Jesuit High School in Indianapolis, Indiana.

⁷ See Albert Walters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Philip Graham Ryken, *What is the Christian Worldview?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006); Richard T. Hughes, *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar: How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

host of authors such as C.S. Lewis, Phillip Yancey, and Richard Foster, and grapple with how to engage modern culture through the mind of Christ. In the 12th grade, students choose at least one of our Christian Studies electives. These courses include Eastern and Western World Religions, Faith through Film and Fiction, Bioethics, Ethics and Culture, Origins and the Bible, Eschatology, Israel in the Modern World, Introduction to Biblical Languages, and Resilient Faith. Applying all they have learned in their previous Christian Studies classes, students explore these critical topics with a new depth and richness. Our Christian Studies courses challenge students to take on the “mind of Christ” as they think about the world around them. Our desire for our students is to have more than just a cognitive understanding of Scripture and theology.

In addition to the Christian Studies classes, all teachers at CHCA, PK to grade 12, are trained to integrate our theological “big ideas” into all of the curricula. Our five theological “big ideas” are taken from Cornelius Plantinga’s *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living*.⁸ Our five “big ideas” are 1) All humans have a longing and hope for something more, 2) God is the Creator and His attributes are reflected in Creation, 3) because of the Fall, all of Creation is marred by the effects of sin, 4) God is restoring all things through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and 5) all who are in Christ have a calling and vocation to participate in God’s restoration. Our teachers are tasked with how to incorporate these “big ideas” into their instruction through the use of essential questions, challenging students to think deeply about the attributes of God, the truth of the Gospel, and how His work in the world relates to every subject area.⁹

Each year of Upper School, students have weekly chapel that seeks to go beyond the classroom and connect experientially through worship and proclamation. Our chapels are designed in age-appropriate ways to engage 7th and 8th graders and 9th to 12th graders. The Upper School employs a full time chaplain to meet the spiritual needs on both campuses. We view this as an asset to come alongside our students, but in no way replacing their connection and involvement in the local church. In our chapel services, we gather as a community to hear God’s word in ways that challenge and encourage us to live out our faith. Topical messages from our chaplain, faculty, and outside speakers provoke conversations in our community. Each year we have a Spiritual Life Emphasis Week in the spring where we have chapel daily, focusing on a specific theme. These opportunities are a spiritual touch point for our students as they seek to grow spiritually. Small group Bible studies also happen on both of our campuses, led by students and faculty alike. At Founders Campus, upperclassmen come down to lead Bible studies with groups of younger students.

Service is also a large part of the culture at CHCA. As mentioned above, 7th and 8th grade students spend a week during intersession doing service learning at home and abroad. Other service opportunities are available on the Founders’ Campus, led by the students from the MSL campus. On the MSL campus, Student Organized Service is an organization where students create service outreaches to meet the needs they encounter around school, the city, or even other parts of the world. Dozens of groups form each year, creating service opportunities for students to serve with their classmates. In the 9th through 12th grades, students are required to

⁸ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁹ The language of “big ideas” and “essential questions” comes from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s *Understanding by Design 2nd Edition* (Alexandria: ASCD, 2005). Understanding by Design is a curricular model of backward design and has been a curricular model at CHCA for over a decade. We will do this by creating an opportunity for students to thrive in a “further faster” world. We will also allow them to pursue their passion and foster a love of learning that goes beyond an education of checking boxes and jumping through hoops. We intend to raise up emotionally mature and healthy young people. And through all of this, we intend to help our students be theologically rooted in a Christ-centered worldview.

serve 120 hours over their four years as a graduation requirement. In the end, our graduating seniors average over 200 hours per person, far surpassing the requirement.

Our changing world needs leaders. It needs people who are passionate critical thinkers, problem solvers, and innovators. It needs people who can communicate well, whether by written or spoken word. It needs people who are motivated self-starters, with entrepreneurial drive. It needs people who can manage themselves and others. It needs people who can face adversity and not be shaken. It needs people willing to serve those around them, putting the needs of others before themselves. Our world needs people who understand that all the world is God's and that He is restoring all things, making all things new through Christ. Our Upper School is creating an environment to raise up young women and young men who will engage the world and shape the future. We are excited for what the future holds. We are excited for what our students will do.