

THE IDEAS THAT WILL BE ESSENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE SPA'S NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

BY JAN SHAW-FLAMM

St. Paul Academy and Summit School has undergone a host of changes in the decade since the school's last strategic plan was launched. Since 2010, the school has raised more than \$70 million, completed two major construction projects and begun a third, implemented new curricula and programming in all three divisions, and welcomed more than 30 new faculty members as veteran teachers have retired. Now, in 2019, the next step in this transformation is underway: the implementation of a new strategic plan that will guide SPA in the decade to come.



Reading the Future: A Strategic Book List

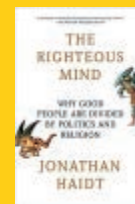
As part of the Board of Trustees' work on the new strategic plan, a book list was created for Trustees that covered topics such as technology, globalization, altruism, capitalism, and innovation. The book list included the following titles.



Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future—Martin Ford



Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life—William Deresiewicz



The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion—Jonathan Haidt

Most strategic plans fit predictable categories, with a fairly rigid set of tasks to accomplish in a predetermined order,” says Bryn Roberts, SPA’s Head of School since 2006. SPA’s new strategic plan, which will launch in spring 2019, is far from predictable, reflecting “the challenges and opportunities we know our students will encounter in the world outside SPA over the next decade and beyond,” Roberts says.

At its core, the plan recognizes that the nature of schooling is shifting constantly—and that the pace of those shifts is markedly different from past generations. “Many of us grew up in a world where education had not changed noticeably in decades,” says Roberts. “You had a sense of what school was like and what it was going to be like for the foreseeable future, and this held true for one’s experience in college and as a working adult.”

That sense of stability has been largely disrupted. “We are now living in a world where uncertainty characterizes the future,” Roberts says, “and the people who will have the best chance of thriving in that world will be those who understand that the key to success will likely be their adaptability, not their predictability. This is a natural outcome of the sweep of globalization and the technological revolution of the last 20 years.”

In planning for that unpredictable future, the SPA Board of Trustees began work on the new strategic plan in 2016, embarking on an 18-month process to learn about the challenges and opportunities that students would face after leaving SPA. Their goal: a plan that would guide the school in preparing students for lives characterized by rapid and unprecedented change. “We don’t know the scope or the specifics,” Roberts says, “but we do have a sense of the skills and habits students will need to have to master the unpredictable tides of the future.”

The aspirational nature of the plan distinguishes it from most other strategic plans, including the school’s 2009 plan, Roberts says. That previous plan was largely focused on operational issues, from stabilizing enrollment to replacing retired faculty to raising money for construction projects. The school’s current operational strength allows for “a more audacious vision, focused on how to provide students with the skills and habits that will be required to thrive in the dynamic world that awaits them,” says Roberts.

The plan does not focus primarily on the details of the academic curriculum—a very deliberate choice. “The foundation of a SPA education has always been mastery of the core disciplines of the liberal arts, and that will always be the case,” says Roberts, who notes that the SPA curriculum has evolved in many ways in recent years, with the revamping of the Lower School math curriculum, the adoption of a readers/

writers workshop model in the Middle School, and the addition of computer science and engineering to all three divisions. “The Board is aware that SPA has one of the most talented and innovative faculty in the country,” says Roberts. “The faculty will lead the charge in continuing to build an innovative academic program—including the integration of the strategic plan into the K-12 curriculum—and will report their progress back to the Board.”

Instead, Board president Tim Welsh wanted the Trustees to be thinking “futuristically” about the larger issues that would impact students as they moved through SPA, their college years, and their professional lives. Welsh, who was a Senior Partner with global consulting firm McKinsey & Company before moving into his current role as a Vice Chairman of Consumer Banking Sales and Service with U.S. Bank, recruited McKinsey consultant and SPA alumnus John Micevych ’11 to create a reading list for Trustees that covered topics such as technology, globalization, altruism, capitalism, and innovation.

Trustees also hosted community leaders for discussion and guidance as the process of creating the new strategic plan unfolded. Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester College, spoke at the Board retreat in August 2016; his emphasis on the character traits that are most important for success in college resonated with Trustee Anne Larsen Hooley. “Brian stressed the importance of empathy, of understanding things through the eyes of someone who’s not like you,” says Hooley, who is also a current SPA parent. Additional speakers included former Minnesota State Colleges and Universities chancellor Steven Rosenstone and Minnesota State Demographer Susan Brower.

Over the course of the next year, the Board organized itself into task forces, each of which was charged with taking inventory of SPA’s current program and making recommendations about how to further incorporate needed skills and attributes into the student experience. “Our group acknowledged that there are really significant challenges out there in the world,” says Trustee and parent Libby Hlavka. “Our mission at SPA is to educate students to be able to make a difference, so what skills will they need in order to do that? They will need to manage large and complicated projects, to learn from failure and then have the resilience to try something new and different.”

“The moment that we are content with the present is the moment when we fail to thoughtfully and comprehensively prepare our students for the future,” says Trustee and parent David Kristal. “We have a great tradition of excellence at SPA, but to maintain that we need to embrace not only the themes of a traditional liberal arts education, but also the character attributes, skills, and ideas that will be essential for the future.”

SIX INITIATIVES

Finding significant overlap in what they found to be essential, the task forces consolidated the results of their research into the six initiatives that eventually became the foundation of the new strategic plan:

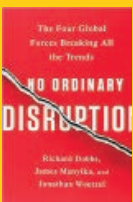
Practicing Altruism and Empathy:

The importance of empathy and altruism flows logically from SPA's mission, "shaping the minds and the hearts of the people who will change the world." However alumni/ae choose to live out the mission of SPA the long-held expectation is that they will act with the good of the larger community in mind.

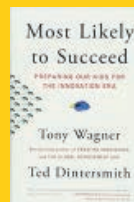
"Our families want their children to be good citizens," says Roberts, "and there is increased awareness now that altruism and empathy are critical attributes of being a good citizen." New programming around empathy will take multiple and age-appropriate forms across the divisions. It will include a cohesive K-12 arc that unifies already strong efforts in teaching the practice of empathy in the Lower, Middle, and Upper Schools through a common language and approach. This initiative will be shaped largely by faculty in partnership with SPA's robust student life programming, led by Dr. Jill Romans, Assistant Head of School for Student Development and Community Life.

Exploring Entrepreneurship: *There is a natural alignment between "entrepreneurship" and preparing our students to change the world in whatever manner and by whatever means they choose, large or small. Being a successful entrepreneur requires inventiveness, a passion for experimentation, imagination and adaptability, and entrepreneurial skills are not limited to the corporate or business realm.*

"Although entrepreneurship is typically associated with the business world, the skills and attributes of a successful entrepreneur will be broadly applicable in many areas of life and work," Roberts says. The school will look at options for creating a curriculum in entrepreneurship and will investigate ways to align entrepreneurial coursework with existing coursework at SPA. "The attributes of an entrepreneur will allow you to be a leader in any environment," says Tim Welsh. "The leadership style that says, 'I'm the boss and I tell people what to do' may have worked in a world that was very stable and hierarchical," he adds, "but we are hoping that in a rapidly changing world that the skills of entrepreneurship will allow students to be leaders in whatever way they choose."



No Ordinary Disruption: The Four Forces Breaking All the Trends—Richard Dobbs et. Al., McKinsey Global Institute



Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era—Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith



Five Minds for the Future—Howard Gardner

Nurturing Global Awareness: *Through trade, travel, and technological innovation, our world has shrunk and is characterized by a degree of connectedness and dependence that would surprise our grandparents. Many strands of the SPA experience connect to the wider world. The challenge for the school is to determine how to fortify these programs in the future while cultivating an enhanced understanding among SPA students what it means to be part of a larger and more diverse world.*

Global awareness as envisioned in the strategic plan is not tied to travel abroad. “Our students already live in a ‘global city’ without traveling at all,” Roberts notes, “and as they move through their educational and professional lives, they are guaranteed to be working with people of different racial, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds.” Nurturing such awareness will mean evaluating the curriculum and extracurricular activities to determine how to incorporate a global perspective in all three divisions. Roberts foresees drawing inspiration from peer international schools, independent schools, and public schools in crafting programs, and looking at local nonprofits, businesses and schools in the Twin Cities that educate and engage youth to learn, work, and thrive as responsible global citizens.

Developing Leaders for the Toughest Challenges:

The problems facing the world, such as global warming, global poverty, and diminishing natural resources, are growing more grave and intractable; the parameters of these challenges shift constantly and there is no single solution for these sprawling and complex challenges. Making progress will require collaboration across disciplines and between individuals.

This kind of collaboration is already underway in many areas of the SPA experience, but the strategic plan envisions a more cohesive program that will teach the art and science of collaboration throughout the K-12 experience. New programming around collaboration will help students learn to work effectively in diverse groups toward a common goal in ways that engage all students, whether they are natural leaders or not. Roberts notes that many of the changes SPA has already implemented will support such new programming: the 2013 shift to a block schedule in the Upper School, for example, provides the space and time for new initiatives that would allow students to address problems that reflect their passions and interests, test their solutions against real-world conditions, and reflect on their progress and struggle and learn from failure.

Building Character: *For decades, SPA has recognized the importance of character development among students, and fully appreciated that building character attributes is as essential as nurturing students’ intellectual capabilities.*

The school uses a wide variety of tools and programming to help instill these attributes over the course of a student’s time at SPA, and the strategic plan calls for an even more organized approach, including the creation of a “character curriculum map” analogous to the map for academics for each desired character attribute that shows how these character traits will be developed over course of the SPA career.

Such a map will create a common understanding across the Lower, Middle, and Upper Schools about character development, and would include class activities, extracurricular programming, and the engagement of parents and families. SPA will also look for models among schools which have already implemented successful character development programs, such as the KIPP Schools in Minneapolis.

Planning for SPA’s Financial Future: *Without sound finances and careful planning SPA will not have the resources to support its admirable programmatic aspirations. SPA’s finances, as assessed and measured by the task force, are strong and, unlike many of its competitors, have flourished since the last recession. The challenge for the future is to ensure that SPA’s financial platform remains robust during the renovation of the Upper School and the implementation of exciting, new curriculum initiatives.*

SPA’s opening enrollment in the fall of 2018 was 929—at the high end of the school’s ideal enrollment target of between 920 and 930 students. “We never intended to increase enrollment, even as the footprint of the school grew,” Roberts says. The strategic plan calls for maintaining overall enrollment at its current level, keeping tuition increases as close to the rate of inflation as possible, and refinancing the current bond (from the construction of the Middle School in 2000) to a more favorable interest rate. Careful financial planning will allow the school to fulfill its most important strategic initiative: the hiring, supporting, and retaining of its stellar faculty.