



# The Deep End

How one school adopted intensives to prepare students for a changing world

*By Nancy Schatz Alton and Richard Kassissieh*

According to the World Economic Forum’s “Future of Jobs Report,” 65% of students entering primary school will end up working in jobs that don’t exist yet in today’s workforce. Still, many schools continue to base their schedules on an educational model from the late 1800s, which includes roughly hour-long, single-subject class periods that take place on campus. At University Prep (WA), our 2020 strategic plan found us questioning whether our long-held practices best prepare our students for their futures.

As we developed our strategic plan, the board of trustees, faculty

members, and staff explored what students were and were not gaining from their UPrep experience through a combination of focus groups and surveys. Among others, two themes emerged from this work: The need to provide students the opportunity to focus on one course at a time, and the desire to strongly connect classroom learning to our city, region, and world. We decided our next academic innovation should include time for work off-campus, opportunities to engage with experts, and the ability to focus on extended projects.

After two years of exploration, overarching framework design, approval

of new course proposals, and curriculum development with our faculty, in the 2018–2019 school year, we made the most significant change to the school’s curriculum in its 43-year history. UPrep rolled out 35 intensive courses to all sixth through 12th graders, allowing students to focus on a single course of study for three weeks, creating a structure for a deep, collaborative, and student-led learning experience. We transformed a seven-class semester schedule into one in which students take six classes each semester and one class during each three-week intensive term in January and June. Intensive courses cover

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all subject areas, carry equal credit as semester classes, include 40% more class time, feature core academic skills, and meet our objectives to prepare students for their future.

### OUR APPROACH

Innovation is often about adapting a great idea, so rather than start from square one, we searched online for programs already in place. Many independent schools are making room for immersion-style learning through a January term or experiential week. For many years, The Catlin Gabel School (OR) ran a weeklong Winterim program in the upper school, which was just relaunched as 10-day immersives program at the end of the 2019–2020 school year. In March 2018, The Northwest School (WA) launched Summits, in which students take a single enrichment class for two weeks.

We also learned about the intensives program at Hawken School (OH). Ten years ago, the school pioneered credit-bearing intensives in its upper school during the final three weeks of each semester. It was more than an enrichment-style program. During ninth grade, intensives are part of the core curriculum, but students have more choices as they progress. This model aligned with our objectives, and we adopted it.

Knowing it'd be a considerable risk because the intensive classes carried the same weight as semester classes and many of the courses were part of graduation requirements, we took some steps to prepare. The year before we rolled out the program, we transitioned from a daily schedule of 45-minute and 65-minute classes to a schedule of consistent 70-minute periods; this was the first step we took to demonstrate our curriculum innovation to the community. We visited Hawken School twice to learn from their staff, and we shared ideas with The Bay



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School of San Francisco (CA), which launched credit-bearing immersion-style classes on the same timeline as we did. We first introduced the program to students during an assembly and to parents and guardians through the school's email communications, website, magazine, and an education event with a Q&A period.

### BUILDING THE PROGRAM

Our teachers have long asked for opportunities to offer courses across academic departments, and intensives have given them the time and space to develop new courses that enable students to see the world through a multidisciplinary lens. As we began to plan, every department was required to submit course proposals based on guidelines, and faculty members worked together during professional development days to workshop new ideas.

Faculty members created two-thirds of the intensives classes by transforming existing semester classes and created the other third with ideas specifically for intensives. When approving intensive classes, we looked for relevant content that met the proposal guidelines and connected to learning from organizations outside of our school. We wanted to ensure that students learned new material and skills, too. We looked to approve proposals that would offer students a chance to think rigorously while engaging in compelling off-campus experiences. Teachers used their networks to reach out to organizations, and parents and students connected us to organizations, too.

Some courses are seemingly made for intensives, such as an exploration of human rights on location in Colombia or filmmaking in various Seattle locales. For “Confucius, K-Pop: East Asia Changes the World,” one of the intensives offered in the

first year, off-campus experiences included visits to a Shinto shrine in rural Washington, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, and a local Korean restaurant. Several other intensives, such as “Deep Space Six,” “Humanities,” “The Duwamish Through Art and Science,” “The Graphic Novel,” and “Environmental Ethics and Advocacy,” allow students to learn with teachers who are experts in different subject areas.

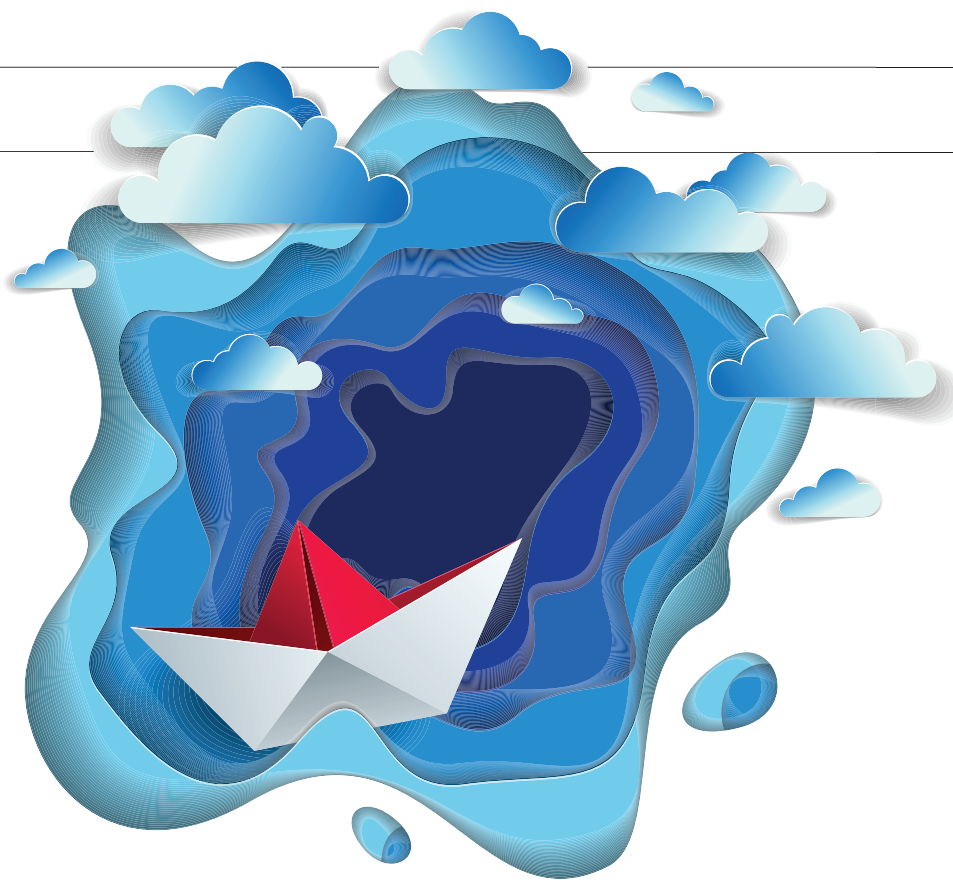
Our experts were more than guest speakers. They partnered with UPrep teachers to plan and lead off-site educational sessions. During the first year of intensives, one student produced a research project about polio, inspired by a visit to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle. Another student, informed by fieldwork in a marine biology course, invented a mythical Arctic Sea otter, his imagined transformation of a river otter transplanted to the Arctic ecosystem. Others designed prototype student desks in the engineering

immersive, informed by their visits to the Microsoft Inclusivity Studio and Boeing's 777 factory. Students in “Global Link American South” studied the American civil rights movement on location, traveling to Atlanta and Montgomery. Firsthand learning became more specific, memorable, and impactful.

### WHERE WE ARE NOW

Students now have more control over the design of their academic programs. Students propose what courses they want to take the following year, then advisers, grade-level deans, and their families review their proposals and provide comments. Some students choose to take a high-interest, less-stressful course as the intensive so that they can take a break from an academically challenging semester. Other students take their hardest course in the intensive, so they can focus on it and make their semester easier.

The mental state of being completely immersed in an activity, or





## BY THE NUMBERS

Intensives at University Prep (WA), a grade 6–12 independent school in Seattle, rolled out in the 2018–2019 school year.

- Courses: 35
- Instructional hours per intensive: 78 (compared with 55 in a typical semester)
- Class trips: 135
- Daily written reflections in statistics: 360
- Tools used in engineering: 20
- Works of art created: 305
- Pounds of clay used: 500
- Handmade books created: 231

“flow,” was frequently evident. Post-course student surveys reflected an appreciation for immersion-style learning. One student noted that this type of all-day education is how she wished school was set up every day, and she appreciated time to get to know one group of students.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

As we continue to evolve our intensives, we reflect on what we’ve learned so far.

### **Some teachers felt like beginners.**

We funded summer curriculum development grants to intensive teacher teams and structured teaching schedules so that intensive teachers had an additional prep period during the semester prior. But for the first

time, teachers were teaching for a full day, for three weeks, without a free period. During teacher-to-teacher talking forums in two required faculty workshops, teachers articulated challenges planning, teaching, and assessing within the full-day format and explored ways to provide students with more leadership, autonomy, and self-reflection. Faculty members who weren’t teaching intensives recognized their colleagues needed their help and offered their assistance to all intensive classes. This led to a new practice of assigning one teacher to support each intensive section.

**Students can focus deeply on their work.** Many students who were apprehensive about all-day classes realized this structure was often

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## Workshop *in practice*

deeply interesting. A student in the painting intensive told us that he had initially dreaded the idea of sitting in a room for six hours, but once he was in the course, he learned that breaks helped him stay focused. Classes typically include a midmorning and midafternoon break. We discovered that it's critical to chunk the day into at least four blocks of time so that students learn through a variety of intellectual and physical postures.

**It's important to pay attention to what resonates.** Sixty-five percent of students said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the experience, compared with only 12% who preferred their semester classes. We learned what courses did and didn't resonate for students and adjusted offerings appropriately for the next intensive. "Statistics," "Filmmaking in Seattle," and "Engineering I" were more popular than anticipated, while it turned out that students wanted to take yoga and golf alongside their other classes during the semester instead of as intensive classes. For the 2019–2020 school year, students signed up more evenly across classes, since the classes were no longer new, and the offerings reflected our learning about what subjects were more and less popular in the intensive format.

We modeled creative responsiveness to a changing world, the usefulness of student-led immersion learning, and the value of community experiences. We look forward to refining this work next year and beyond, and sharing our work with the regional and national independent school community. ■

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