



WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

February 3, 2022

Dear Westridge Families,

As a forward-thinking school committed to academic excellence and preparing our students to lead lives of impact, we take seriously our responsibility to continually assess our program. After many years engaged in research and discussion with educational leaders and college admission professionals, culminating in the work of the Westridge Strategic Plan 2020-2025, Westridge has decided to move away from the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program. It will be replaced with **Advanced Courses designed to make rigor come alive in ways that promote deeper learning and the critical thinking skills and habits of mind that colleges and employers are looking for today and for the future.**

Westridge Advanced Courses are being developed by our faculty and will be introduced in phases over the next three school years. We currently expect to introduce four Advanced Courses for fall 2022: "Crisis and Courage in Global History," "Identity, Borders, and Revolutions: Advanced Cultural Studies in Spanish," and "Latin IV Vergil: From the Underworld to Olympus" (replacing AP European History, AP Spanish, and AP Latin, respectively), as well as Full Stack Web Development, the first course created by our new Computer Science and Engineering Department.

Additional Advanced Courses will be phased in each year until the 2025-2026 school year, when the full array of new courses will be in place, and we will no longer offer any AP-designated courses. As part of this philosophical shift to advanced studies focused on deeper, more purposeful learning and engagement, we will also move to unweighted grades beginning next year.

The reasons for these changes are numerous and nuanced, and we look forward to discussing them with you in the coming months and years. **At the most fundamental level, we know we can increase the intellectual rigor of our program and better meet our vision of developing adventurous thinkers when freed from the constraints of a standardized curriculum**—from a curriculum with an inherent need to emphasize speed and memorization on the path to a single, cumulative test. The rigidity of the AP curriculum and exams constrains and conflicts with curricular advances supported by research into the brain and learning, as well as educational best practices for developing critical education and life skills.

We are developing Advanced Courses that:

- introduce more meaningful rigor by shifting from the memorization of facts to the application of knowledge—knowing how to think about and synthesize information to solve problems and produce original analyses
- are more inquiry-based and demand sophisticated, independent thinking
- prepare our students for the world today and in the future by emphasizing learning and skills that colleges and workplaces report valuing
- provide flexibility for in-depth discussions to flourish and course content and projects to be responsive to student interest and real-world events, both central to deep learning and information retention
- offer more diverse perspectives and content
- allow for significantly more personalized teaching and learning
- move beyond the solo endeavor of AP studies to more collaborative learning, which research shows improves learning outcomes
- integrate more student research projects and interdisciplinary studies

In some cases, courses could closely resemble an existing AP course—math courses come first to mind—but in many they won't. **We will continue to administer AP exams where our related Advanced Courses provide relevant preparation. When Westridge does not administer an exam, students may sit for it at another location.**

As you may know, leading independent schools have been moving away from formal AP designations for nearly 20 years, including Sidwell Friends, Phillips Exeter, Andover, Chapin, Nightingale-Bamford, Lawrenceville, and National Cathedral School. California schools with advanced course programs include Castilleja, Cate, Crossroads, Campbell Hall, Marin Academy, Crystal Springs Uplands, Thacher, and The Webb Schools. Each school that we have spoken with reports significant improvements in student engagement and learning, and no negative impact on college admissions. In fact, many emphasize a positive impact on college admissions as students are better able to distinguish themselves in the application process.

Feedback from these schools was borne out by our discussions with many of the college admissions professionals with whom we work, who all confirmed this move would not disadvantage Westridge students in the college admission process. Their interest lies not in the AP program itself but, rather, in students challenging themselves within the curriculum of their particular school. Colleges and universities know Westridge and our students well. Our college counseling team will continue to utilize their strong relationships to ensure their colleagues in college admission offices have a clear understanding of our advanced offerings and the rigor and goals of the program.

As mentioned, we will have many discussions as our program is implemented in the coming years. To answer immediate questions regarding the move beyond APs to Advanced Courses developed specifically for our students, we have attached answers to

questions we anticipate and **invite you to join us for an online Town Hall Meeting, Monday, February 7, at 6:30 pm.** (A Zoom link will be sent via email.)

The Town Hall Meeting will be most relevant for Middle and Upper School families. We will also schedule conversations later for Lower School families that will address how the Lower and Middle School will also create more opportunities for deep, meaningful learning within current classes, as well as questions regarding Advanced Courses in the Upper School.

We hope you are as enthusiastic as we are about this important program evolution and the opportunities it will provide for our students—it is the kind of innovation afforded by the agility of strong independent school communities like Westridge. Thoughtful change aligned with our mission is demanded by our responsibility to our students, our leadership in girls' education, and our commitment to excellence in all we do. Indeed, our motto, *Surgere Tentamus* or *We Strive to Rise*, is a call to both our students and our institution. Our current curriculum serves our students well as revealed in feedback from our alumnae. Yet we are energized by the prospect of a programmatic change that will more accurately mirror the type of deep, reflective learning we always hope to instill in our students; a change that will encourage students' growth as independent and original thinkers prepared to take control of their collegiate education and assume positions of leadership and impact.

Surgere Tentamus!



Elizabeth J. McGregor
Head of School



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Scan below for additional information, or visit: www.westridge.org/advancedcourses.

