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The Skill and Habit of Attention

As Horace Taft started our school, he articulated two guiding ideas: educating the whole student and service. These ideas have stood the test of time and continue to guide the school today. Educating the whole student—rather than just the mind, just the body, or just a student’s character or soul—was a rather progressive idea in late 19th-century America. Service was an ancient idea imbued with a meaning inflected by Mr. Taft’s era. Over the ensuing 13 decades, first the Tafts themselves and then Taft’s faculty have embodied, modeled, and practiced these ideas. Taft’s faculty create the conditions for student learning, and it is incumbent on us as educators to ask continually what attending to the whole student and service mean and require today.

This spring, we celebrate four Taft faculty who have embodied and practiced service and holistic education. Baba Frew is the individual at Taft most responsible over the last three decades for keeping the flame of service alive. She has created and facilitated programs that equip students both to understand and to practice service such that they are inclined and able to practice it after they graduate. It is an urgent priority for the school to build on the foundation Baba has created through her perseverance, determination, kindness, and relationships—both on and off campus.

Peter Frew and Susan and Steve McCabe epitomize educators who embody what it means to teach the whole student. I know this from personal experience: These poor souls had to deal with me over two years of math (geometry with Mr. McCabe and Precalc with Mrs. McCabe) and four seasons of squash and tennis. Their intuitive ability to connect with a range of adolescents—to earn the trust and confidence of their students—through humor, candid feedback, personalized instruction, and faith in the mind, body, and spirit of the students in front of them are the common thread between them and the generations of legendary Taft faculty they join.

As we celebrate these and other retirees, we are also cognizant of the differences between our moment in time and Mr. Taft’s, including things that were once taken for granted that we now see as pressing educational needs. At the top of the list is the skill and habit of attention.

Our culture is conducting an unwitting but radical experiment in undermining our capacity to learn how to pay attention. The “attention economy” in which smartphones, social media, gaming, and pornography vie for students’ time, money, and desire requires schools to respond intentionally. The good news is that, partly as a result of the forces eroding attention in most of us, we know more than ever about how important attention is, how it is acquired, and what it means. As Taft looks ahead to the second quarter of the 21st century, skills and habits like attention will emerge as key abilities we want every student to develop during their time here—abilities that have become newly urgent in light of relatively new technology.
The writer Nicholas Carr sounded the alarm early in his 2008 Atlantic essay, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Carr described “an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, repurposing the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory… I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy... Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.”

Carr’s essay appeared the year after the first iPhone went on sale and about the same time that many of today’s Taft students were born. Carr was describing himself—a hyper-educated adult for whom deep reading may have felt like something that developed naturally but that actually resulted from practice, incentives, and feedback. Moreover, he—like just about anyone reading this—grew up in an environment far more conducive to developing the ability to attend to one thing for a prolonged period of time than the environment in which today’s adolescents come of age. (Enthusiasts on this topic will note that prophets like Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and their ilk saw all of this coming as television and modern advertising became dominant cultural forces.)

To be clear, most adolescents are not naturally inclined to pay attention to, say, geometry or poetry for sustained periods of time. This is where the skill of a McCabe or Frew (or fill in the blank with your favorite Taft teachers) comes in—knowing how to keep a 15-year-old focused on learning both inside and, most remarkably, outside of the classroom.

Not only does today’s hardware and software conspire to severely limit the ability of most adolescents to attend to one thing for a sustained period of time, they also train students to attend to the lowest-common-denominator material—anything that will generate the next dopamine hit and keep them coming back for more, often to their own detriment. As Matthew Crawford writes in *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual In An Age of Distraction*, “Capitalism has gotten hip to the fact that for all our talk of an information economy, what we really have is an attentional economy, if the term ‘economy’ applies to what is scarce and therefore valuable.” The financial incentives for companies to continue to prey on our students’ attention are endless.

As Taft looks ahead to the second quarter of the 21st century, skills and habits like attention will emerge as key abilities we want every student to develop during their time here—abilities that have become newly urgent in light of relatively new technology. This requires that we ensure that Taft’s 24/7 environment equips students to develop the habits of attention that serve as the foundation for all the other learning we want for them.
States, this country that’s given us all so much, in a way that is varied,” he says. Not only has he been able to live all over the world, but he has also been able to build expertise in a range of areas. Before heading to Albania, he led the State Department’s Office of Global Food Security, which aims to fight hunger and help the world’s poorest increase food production and adapt agriculture to climate change. “Every two to three years, I have a new opportunity to learn about a place, and live it, experience it, and hopefully give back to it,” Wisner says.

All that travel has its challenges, however, particularly now that he’s married with two young children. “It’s both an adventure and at the same time, difficult,” Wisner says. “You uproot your family, you ask your spouse to make sacrifices for your career, you ask your kids to change schools and make new friends every one to four [or so] years.”

What keeps him going is his faith in the work he does. “You have to believe in—at least, I have found—the ultimately constructive role that the United States plays in the world,” he says. He was recently able to help forge a deal for the Albanian military to buy U.S. helicopters, he said by way of example; the partnership will support U.S. jobs while providing Albania with equipment it needs to fight wildfires and contribute to NATO operations around the globe.

In his prior role leading the Office of Global Food Security, he was able to help mobilize millions of dollars of food research funding that will benefit people all over the world. “I [was able] to contribute to all of those things. It’s immensely rewarding,” Wisner says.

If there’s a throughline to Wisner’s career, it’s a focus on service, he says. “It goes back to the Taft motto.” The idea that you should use your skills and education to help others, he says, “is one of those things that I took from Lance Olsen, Willy MacMullen, Jon Willson, and all these incredible teachers that I had.”
Passionate About Literacy

“I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE HERE. I know from the moment our parents started this business that I wanted one day to carry it forward,” says Will Reycraft ’04, who, along with his sister, Sera Reycraft Hoffman ’02, and brother Thad Reycraft ’10, helps run their family’s business, Benchmark Education Company (BEC). Their sister, Meta Reycraft Fallon ’07, serves as a BEC advisory board member while working as an account director at Salesforce.

What began as a small operation run out of their parents’ basement 25 years ago, has grown into one of the nation’s leading producers of educational programs and resources, with a presence in 70% of all U.S. school districts and an additional 35 countries around the globe.

“Our dad had been in the educational publishing business for a long time, and he often heard from teachers who were looking for opportunities to teach individual content areas—science, math, and social studies—while also building their students’ literacy and language skills,” Sera says. “He was thinking about starting his own business, and finally our mom said to him, ‘If you want to do this, let’s make it happen.’”

Determined to address that need, BEC soon pioneered a new approach to education, creating resources that taught specific subjects while simultaneously developing students’ reading comprehension. “To take a simple example,” Sera says, “say students are reading an earth science text. The passage in front of them will include all of the information they need to learn, but it will be what we call a complex text that requires them to unpack various language structures in order to digest the content.”

Passionate about literacy, the team at BEC is committed to reaching as many classrooms as possible. From the company’s inception, they have adapted all of their content into Spanish, growing into one of the largest publishers of Spanish literacy materials for students in pre-K through fifth grade. With the emergence of new technologies, they now create digital versions of their entire print catalog. They have also always put a particular focus on supporting learners who may require more help than their peers, with dedicated resources for individual interventions, special education, and summer schools.

So when Will and Sera—who spent spring breaks and summer vacations pitching in at BEC, sometimes joined by their Taft roommates—saw the impact that their parents were having, they were eager to be a part of their vision. Sera, who earned a master’s degree from Columbia University’s Teachers College with a concentration in language literacy and technology, officially joined BEC in 2008, while Will stepped away for a few years to gain experience as an analyst and work at a venture capital growth equity firm before returning to the company in 2013. They have worked side by side ever since (quite literally, considering that their desks are in the same room). Sera, in her capacity as co-president, focuses primarily on product development and marketing, and Will, also co-president, oversees the sales, professional development, finance, and technology teams. Their brother, Thad, who earned an MBA from Cornell University and previously worked at IBM, is now director of platform product management.

While each sibling manages his or her own aspects of the business, they have also taken a page out of their parents’ playbook. With the emergence of new materials for students in pre-K through fifth grade. With the emergence of new technologies, they now create digital versions of their entire print catalog. They have also always put a particular focus on supporting learners who may require more help than their peers, with dedicated resources for individual interventions, special education, and summer schools. Our dad had been in the educational publishing business for a long time, and he often heard from teachers who were looking for opportunities to teach individual content areas—science, math, and social studies—while also building their students’ literacy and language skills,” Sera says. “He was thinking about starting his own business, and finally our mom said to him, ‘If you want to do this, let’s make it happen.’”

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While each sibling manages his or her own aspects of the business, they have also taken a page out of their parents’ playbook and are in constant contact, always ready to provide feedback and support. It’s an approach that extends not only to the running of BEC but also to the creation of new materials. “We say in every department—whether you’re in accounting or training teachers or working on new technology—you are learning about what our customers need,” Sera says. “Our parents have done a great job building this team over the last 25 years.” Will adds. “We spend a lot of time in the field and out in schools listening to education leaders, superintendents, and teachers, and their feedback really dictates what we create.”

In recent years, as they have each become parents themselves, both Will and Sera have found an even closer connection to BEC’s mission. “This is work that we take personally. It’s not just about getting a product out the door. To create materials that are going to be used by millions of students and teachers throughout the country, that’s a huge responsibility,” Will says. “And now it’s become how we teach our own children to read. It just brings that much more meaning to what we do.”

—Christopher Browner ’12
Always intrigued with the intersection of biology and technology, Delapenha veered away from medical school into the innovative world of biotechnology, specifically the science of hair care. As CEO and founder of Strands Hair Care and The Hair Lab by Strands, Delapenha blends individual results with mass marketing. Traditional hair care is a guessing game, he says, with most people not knowing the unique ingredients they should seek out to address their particular concerns. The Strands concept is simple: Each person’s hair, to the protein composition, sebum, and porosity of the strands, with chemists, stylists, and bioengineers involved in developing each customer’s unique blend. Strands’ online-only business has taken off, thanks to social media sites like TikTok and to the support of influencers drawn to the unique formulations that address everything from dandruff to split ends.

Eric Delapenha's other business, The Hair Lab by Strands, is now available in 2,800 Walmart stores. It’s Strands, but on a massive scale. Using a hand-held tester in select stores, shoppers can quickly analyze 26 different aspects of their hair to find their best formulation among the products on the shelves at the store. By adding need-specific “doses” into shampoo and conditioner bases, shoppers can customize their formulations at home.

“We’re able to give everyone access to customized hair care based on their hair’s biology—not assumptions or guesses—at prices that don’t leave anybody out,” he promises.

Today, Delapenha’s focus is on innovation and increasing distribution.

“How do we address unmet needs in the market?” he says. “There’s an actual true need and market opportunity. In research and development, every week we are looking at pricing and costs so we can see if we can keep it affordable and efficacious.”

There’s a worldwide market for this kind of specialized hair care, he says. “In the next five years, we’re rapidly growing our hair care business by expanding distribution. We’re seeing some very lucrative partnerships.”

“There is an incredible amount of room for growth. That’s just for hair in the United States. We really do see a strong need for customized hair, skin, and body needs,” he said.

Hair care is a crowded field, he says. “The ease with which people start companies is accelerating—not setting up a website with a few clicks, putting the beautiful, sexy branding on it, and making it seem new and innovative. It’s been very easy to set up a new brand in a crowded space, but there are very few brands customizing efficacious products. There’s a lot of brands that can pop up a quiz that drives users to standardized products in their line or offers slightly tweaked formulations, but it’s not through individual hair strand analysis.”

“Things that get me really excited are… pushing the envelope on innovation,” he says. “There’s a moment that you build towards—the moment that always stands out—when you and the team have put thousands of hours into this, and you start to see your first shoppers flowing in, and you begin to get feedback from customers.”

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Navigating Supply Chain Complexities

PRIOR TO THE COVID PANDEMIC, many people probably didn’t think too much about how goods traveled the world. We just expect what we want to be on shelves when we want them. The pandemic highlighted the need to feed their enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. Customers require real-time information, and this must be sent electronically based on shipment milestones. If it’s not sent electronically, then customers require the ability to track and trace their shipments online or via Android or iOS applications.

In addition to those challenges, Hedges says the sector has had more compliance and regulatory challenges come into play in a post-9/11 environment, which adds complexities to the supply chain. “In IT, it’s challenging,” she says. “I’ve never been an analyst or a developer. I was hired to be a people manager. I’m trying to help my team grow their careers and prioritize the work, and insulate them from some of the stressors that come with the business.”

Typical days include many Zoom calls between Expeditors’ 175 offices across the globe. “Steady days are filled with touching base with my leadership team, some of whom work in Chennai, India, whether that be my peers and senior management or meeting with the management team who reports to me,” she says. “We meet in order to understand the work being requested and how to balance and juggle resources in order to meet deadlines. It takes a great deal of coordination, communication, planning and follow-through among all parties in the supply chain, from the buyers ordering the merchandise, to the parties manufacturing the goods, all the way through to delivery to the final destination point.”

Hedges says the satisfaction of hitting aggressive delivery deadlines outweighs the challenges of weather delays, accidents, or other hiccups that might affect deliveries. The logistics industry has also gained greater visibility since the advent of online shopping giants such as Amazon. “The need for real-time updates that we as consumers expect from our home deliveries has extended to the demand for real-time information in the world of international air and ocean freight, as well as domestic truck and rail cargo,” she notes.

Looking back on her 30-year career, Hedges says she’s stayed with her company because she continues to be challenged. “Expeditors was my second job after college and as a 23-year-old, I certainly couldn’t have predicted I would be at a company this long, longer than I had then been alive,” she says. “Going through the dot-com-boom years of the early 2000s would have been fascinating.”

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Hedges at Expeditors International’s global headquarters in Seattle.

Left: Sarah Richards Hedges ’88 on one of many container vessels that play a big part in her work for Expeditors International.

Above: A container terminal at the Port of Seattle, with cranes used for loading and unloading the vessels.

—Bonnie Blackburn-Penhollow ’84
Next Level Learning

Honors Modern Algebra

The depth and breadth of the academic talent in the Taft community has allowed our faculty to continuously look for and create new opportunities for learning at the highest levels. Enter Dr. Mostafa Mirabi. With undergraduate and master’s degrees in pure mathematics from Tehran Polytechnic University, Dr. Mirabi spent time as a research scholar at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Science before making his way to Wesleyan University, where he earned a Ph.D. in pure mathematics. His primary research centers around mathematical logic, focusing on model theory and its applications in combinatorics and algebra. At Taft, Dr. Mirabi teaches a range of high-level courses, including BC-Calculus, Linear Algebra, and Differential Equations. This semester, he is offering one of the highest-level mathematics classes ever taught at Taft: Honors Modern Algebra.

“The class was developed to meet the growing demand for advanced mathematical concepts and to challenge students in abstract reasoning,” explains Dr. Mirabi. “Honors Modern Algebra stands out as the ‘most abstract’ and challenging math course.”

As a discipline, modern algebra—also known as abstract algebra—is rooted in the exploration of group theory. The primary goal for Dr. Mirabi’s students is to explore the Sylow theorem, which states that if we have a group (a mathematical set with a specific operation) with a particular order or size, and if a prime number divides that size, then the group contains a subgroup of that size.

“The theorem provides insights into the structure of groups and their subgroups, making it a fundamental tool in group theory,” explains Dr. Mirabi. And while that may feel like an abstract concept to some, the applications are both concrete and vast. “Group theory has numerous applications, including cryptography, coding theory, and symmetry analysis in various scientific fields,” Dr. Mirabi says.

In cryptography, for example, group theory is important in designing secure encryption algorithms by leveraging the mathematical properties of groups. In the surging field of artificial intelligence (AI), group theory can be applied to recognize and classify patterns, contributing to image and signal processing in AI systems. In physics (specifically quantum mechanics), group theory is used to understand the behavior of particles and the structure of atomic orbitals, while in biology, group theory helps scientists analyze the symmetrical properties of biological molecules in the study of protein structures. It also has powerful and practical applications in chemistry, engineering, geometry and topology, economics, music, and more.

Honors Modern Algebra is designed for students who are passionate about theoretical mathematics and who are looking for a rigorous intellectual challenge. Eleven students are currently enrolled in the course, among them, Martyna Glowacka ’25.

“I decided to enroll in Honors Modern Algebra because of the unique perspective on mathematics this class provides,” says Martyna. “The course is proof-based, which, in my view, is the essence of mathematics. This approach not only allows me and other students to understand the theory thoroughly, but also discover new connections between different portions of the material.”

Discovering connections within the material is an element of learning that also speaks to Vincent Chen ’24.

“Dr. Mirabi provides students with ample time for independent thought, encouraging us to explore connections between the steps of proofs. Moreover, he consistently places new topics within a broader context, using them to clarify fundamental concepts. This approach shattered my preconception that math is a dull, linear process. Beyond being an exceptional lecturer, Dr. Mirabi is a very dedicated teacher. His teaching style has significantly altered my perspective on mathematics.”
Around THE POND

Academic Inquiry

Honors Seminar in Economic Research

HOW CAN WE USE ECONOMICS to change the world?

While the question may seem daunting, it is one students in Brianne Foley’s Honors Seminar in Economic Research are working to answer: “Each student wrote a very significant—epic, really—research paper on a topic of their choosing,” explains Foley. “They were also tasked with defending their theses in presentations to an audience that included classmates, faculty members, and school administrators. This was high-level and challenging work.”

Honors Seminar in Economic Research is an advanced level research class designed to help students further develop their research skills through deep dives and thoughtful exploration into current and global economic issues. The students employ critical thinking skills with the foundational understanding of economic theory—economic indicators, development, government policy, market structures, labor markets, game theory, externalities—gleaned through their prior economics and mathematics courses. For many, the research topic was personal: “I visited Shanghai for the first time when I was 7, and I was fascinated by the contrast between the west and east sides of its Bund. On the west side, there are immense colonial structures in Gothic, Neoclassical, and Baroque architectural styles. On the east side, there are futuristic skyscrapers that sprouted up in the past four decades. As a 7-year-old, I never really investigated this further,” says Spencer Louie ‘24. “During the past semester, I researched this 1973 Cold War oil crisis, and connected it with the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts occurring now,” explains Anmay Suri ‘24. “I wanted to research this because of the way these current global events are impacting our Taft community—the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Palestine conflict and all the communities that are affected by both. For me, the most impactful part of the research was just seeing the history and the trajectory of how oil crises align with different areas of conflict, as well as how they affect the global market.”

Topics ranged from basic financial literacy to the modern defense industry to studies of the film and pharmaceutical industries. Overall, the research was formidable, notes Foley, but also rewarding. For some, it may simply be a starting point. “For me, learning how different the experience of going back to China is knowing this history is significant,” notes Louise. “But I realized that there is still so much to uncover about this fascinating topic—how many different avenues there are left for me to explore.”

Below: From Rina Kurihara ‘24’s research paper: “The Pacific War: Justification of War without War” predicts Japan’s GDP per capita growth from 1873 to 2020 by using data from the Maddison Project. The red line outlines Japan’s GDP per capita growth until the start of the Pacific War. The yellow line, “Predicted, without war” predicts Japan’s GDP per capita growth without war. The blue line outlines Japan’s actual GDP per capita growth from the Pacific War to 2020.

Above left: Honors Seminar in Economic Research Teacher, History Department Head, and Assistant Director of the Global Leadership Institute Brianne Foley.

Above right: “The Pacific War: Justification of War without War” predicts Japan’s GDP per capita growth from 1873 to 2020 by using data from the Maddison Project. The red line outlines Japan’s GDP per capita growth until the start of the Pacific War. The yellow line, “Predicted, without war” predicts Japan’s GDP per capita growth without war. The blue line outlines Japan’s actual GDP per capita growth from the Pacific War to 2020.
A Plethora of History

LESS THAN AN HOUR FROM TAFT’S campus is an extraordinary collection of art—a gallery housing more than 300,000 pieces. Founded in 1832, The Yale University Art Gallery is the oldest university art museum in America. It is a center for teaching, learning, and scholarship and is a preeminent cultural asset for Yale University, the wider academic community, and the public, including students in Alex Werrell’s Honors Western Art History class.

Classroom learning came to life as Werrell and his students married their knowledge of specific pieces—and of art, in general—with the works before them in the gallery. “As we walked in the ancient wing of the gallery, we spotted marble sculpture, reliefs, pottery, and mosaics,” recalls Isabella Nascimento ’25. “It was interesting to see the traces of pigment on several reliefs, which provided a real-life example of our ongoing conversation about what art was back then and how it is interpreted today. Likewise, walking along the gallery, we discussed how the political and cultural might of empires is reflected in art itself and the preservation of these pieces, like the ancient city of Dura-Europos and the Roman Empire.”

Connecting with specific pieces began with Shadows of Liberty, a piece by Titus Kaphar. “Kaphar is an artist working now in New Haven whose series, From a Tropical Space, we have studied closely,” notes Werrell. “The piece we viewed features a characteristic Kaphar approach: A classical, traditional portrait of George Washington as military leader is subverted by the blown-out hologram in which he is situated and by the strips of paper hanging from the president’s face and neck. Just as Martin Luther sought to reform the church, Kaphar seeks to reform history. He hammered the strips with rusted nails directly through the canvas; each strip has the name of one of the hundreds of men and women and children Washington enslaved at Mount Vernon.”

Students also visited the Photography Lab at the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, where they learned about conservation practices and sciences at Yale. They had a chance to see massive drafts of Edwin Austin Abbey’s ceiling murals, tarsdermized reptiles and birds, photographs from the earliest days of photography, and even a few Renaissance pieces being touched up with lapis lazuli. Students also learned a lot about the challenges facing photography collections, including how the spectacular array of photography paper textures, thicknesses, tones, and more that alter a photo.

“We were deeply impressed by the quality of the work we saw in the gallery,” notes Sabrina Moffa, Finneas Gateley; middle row, from left, Maggie Zeng, Charlotte Blair, Noah Cinel, Michael Ren, Trevor Stellmach; front row, from left, Caiya Niewinski, Theresa Alves de Oliveira, Luke Zhang, Shane Mettler.

Above: New Inductees are, back row, from left, Nikas Lukyanov, Lachlan Abbott, Bryn Gavigan, Ivy Kargman, Sabrina Moffa, Finneas Gateley; middle row, from left, Maggie Zeng, Charlotte Blair, Noah Cinel, Michael Ren, Trevor Stellmach; front row, from left, Caiya Niewinski, Theresa Alves de Oliveira, Luke Zhang, Shane Mettler.

“CUM LAUDE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY achievement,” noted Head of School Peter Becker ’85 in opening the annual Cum Laude Society induction ceremony. “I’ve always thought that what we recognize isn’t necessarily getting to this point—winning this prize, as it were—but all the effort that it takes to get there and what it signifies, not just about the students who are here on the stage, but the nature of academic pursuit and engagement at Taft more generally: a spirit of inquiry and a spirit of effort and determination in that pursuit that I hope is true of every student at this school.”

Noting that the Cum Laude Society’s Latin motto translates to ‘excellence, justice, and honor,’ Becker said, “I want us all to see these achievements not as getting to the destination, but as one milestone—the next step in a lifelong journey of learning, inquiry, and growth. There is always a next step toward excellence.”

Founded in 1908, the Cum Laude Society is the national scholarship society in secondary schools, corresponding to Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi in colleges and scientific schools. A maximum of 20% of the senior class may be elected to membership in the Cum Laude Society. Based on their mid and upper mid academic records, 15 members (9%) of the Class of 2024 were inducted into the Cum Laude Society in the fall; a second group will be inducted at Commencement in June.

Above: The class in front of Titus Kaphar’s Shadows of Liberty.
Yolanda Wei ’26

At the Forefront of Youth Citizen Science

FOR NEARLY TWO WEEKS IN DECEMBER, scientists, government leaders, captains of business and industry, global and regional NGO leader, venture capitalists, entre- preneurs, and climate-change activists were among the 70,000 people gathered in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), for the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference. The event marked the 28th meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP28) to the United Nation’s climate change accord. This year, a large youth delegation attended a range of events, including Yolanda Wei ’26.

“I have always been focused on envi- ronmental protection,” says Yolanda. To date, Yolanda has made three journeys to polar regions as a citizen scientist with research-driven expedition teams. What she learned along the way has shaped her passion, and moved her to act. “I saw emaciated polar bears, some even perishing due to the diminishing ice floes. The landscape also bore the scars of ris- ing sea temperatures, with extensive areas of sheath plants,” Yolanda recalls. “The diminishing sea area is affecting penguins’ ability to feed on krill. This experience led me to the realization that the envi- ronmental impact has now penetrated the last pristine expanse on Earth.”

Through her experiences, Yolanda learned about many organizations working to impact the environment, including the Peaceland Foundation, an international nonprofit organization that offers long-term educational programs addressing global humanitarian crises and environmental chal- lenges, providing an opportunity for youth representatives to get involved. One of those opportunities: a chance to attend COP28.

Yolanda applied, and was chosen to travel to UAE as a global youth representative. “At COP28 I encountered a diverse group of individuals, including numerous youth representatives, each with their unique advocacy interests and projects,” says Yolanda. “It was inspiring to witness the determination and efforts of people from all walks of life, all committed to combating climate change.”

Yolanda delivered a speech titled “Our Actions for Our Poles” to COP28 attendees. “Drawing from my three trips to the polar regions and numerous scientific research projects, I urged everyone to pay attention to climate change,” Yolanda explains. “I believe that young people should have rich and formal knowledge about this, the defining issue of our time. Scientific research is one of the significant contributions young people can make to stop global warming.”

Left: Yolanda Wei delivered a speech titled “Our Actions for Our Poles” to COP28 attendees.
Above top: Yolanda traveled with the Taft banner to show the school’s support for climate action.
Above: Yolanda at COP28 UAE
Leading the Way
2023 Student Diversity Leadership Conference

EACH YEAR, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) hosts a multi-day, international People of Color Conference. Ten Taft faculty members and six Taft students were among the 8,000 students, educators, and administrators to travel to St. Louis, Missouri, for the most recent People of Color Conference, which explored concepts of truth, knowledge, optimism, joy, and power.

An exciting component of the annual event is the Student Diversity Leadership Conference (SDLC), a companion program for student leaders. SDLC is a multiracial, multicultural gathering of student leaders from independent high schools across the U.S. and abroad. Driven by this year’s theme—Bending the Arc Toward Justice: Radical Optimism, Transformational Joy, Resilience, and Brilliance—SDLC attendees engaged in self-reflection, found allies, and worked to build community. Led by a diverse team of trained adult and peer facilitators, participants also developed cross-cultural communication skills, designed effective strategies for social justice practice through dialogue and the arts, and learned about the foundations of allyship and networking principles. In addition to large group sessions, SDLC “family groups” and “home groups” allowed for more intimate dialogue and sharing.

SDLC attendees, from left: Director of Multicultural Recruitment Shanique Garcia, Janivine Pan ’24, Maya Lewis ’24, Samaad Brown ’25, Muthoni Gichinga ’25, Leo Pineda ’25, Kojo Asmah ’24.

MLK Day 2024

TAFT’S MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY celebration began with a compelling talk by Dean of Community, Justice, and Belonging Thomas Allen. Mr. Allen shared thoughts on both the widely and lesser-known aspects of Dr. King’s life, and considered how his work and principles can shape how we work, connect, and respect one another.

Later in the day, students gathered in small, faculty-led groups to identify ways to use lessons from Dr. King in our life and work as a school community. Specifically, Allen asked students to consider actions built around five key concepts: serving others; standing up for what is right; committing to the principles of love, beauty, and justice; never giving up; and believing that all things are possible.
Morning Meetings

ONE OF TAFT’S GREAT TRADITIONS, MORNING MEETING TALKS EDUCATE AND INFORM, RAISE CONSCIOUSNESS AND AWARENESS, PLANT SEEDS, GROW UNDERSTANDING, AND INCREASE THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF KNOWLEDGE STUDENTS CARRY WITH THEM LONG AFTER THEY LEAVE TAFT. THIS IS JUST A SAMPLING OF SOME OF THE SPEAKERS WHO FILLED BINGHAM AUDITORIUM WITH IDEAS DURING THIS ACADEMIC YEAR.

1 Unsung Heroes of the Civil Rights Movement
Seven Taft students reflected on the “unsung heroes of the Civil Rights Movement,” during a well-researched, powerful, and important Morning Meeting. Muthoni Gichingiri ’25 introduced the Taft community to the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray. Murray’s work as a civil rights activist, advocate, legal scholar and theorist, author, and Episcopal priest advanced the movement and led to expanded legal protection for gender equality.

“And so what? What does that have to do with us? What does that have to do with our motto, Non ut sibi,?” Muthoni asked of Murray’s work. “Rev. Dr. Paul Gross ’69 found himself feeling that something was missing—Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Dr. Viktor Frankl’s higher calling,” he said. Dr. Gross returned to military service part time with the California National Guard. “The answer is encoded even in the Taft School motto. I am not talking just about military service, but service to your community, however you define it, be it your family, local community, perhaps a congregation, your country, or even humanity at large,” said Dr. Gross. “I can tell you that devoting some portion of your life in service to something greater than yourself will bring a satisfaction and peace of mind which you might not expect.” Dr. Gross recently retired from the New Hampshire Air National Guard with 22 years of military service, which included 58 combat missions as a helicopter crewman and physician with the 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Maria Hinojosa
After Maria Hinojosa visited Taft last year, her book, Once I Was You, was named the all-school summer read. Hinojosa returned to Taft last fall to close the circle. In addition to delivering a speech in Bingham, Hinojosa visited classes and led a Q&A session in the Faculty Room. Hinojosa’s 30-year career as an award-winning journalist includes reporting for PBS, CBS, WNBC, CNN, NPR, and anchoring the Emmy Award-winning talk show from WGBH.

4 Drepung Gomang Monks
Monks from Tibet’s Drepung Gomang Monastery returned to Taft this year for a weeklong campus residency, which began with a traditional and fascinating Morning Meeting welcome ceremony. During their time on campus the group meticulously created an interfaith peace mandala of colored sand in the Potter Gallery, visited philosophy and religion classes, and met informally with members of the Taft community. Their work culminated in a dissolution ceremony, where the mandala was ceremoniously swept up, then returned to the sacred waters of the earth—a reflection on the impermanent nature of life and the importance of living with compassion.

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4. Taft Bulletin / SPRING 2024

Media Award, two Robert F. Kennedy Awards, and the Ruben Salazar Lifetime Achievement Award, to name just a few.

Maria Hinojosa: One-on-One. A Pulitzer Prize and Peabody Award winner, she was recently named an Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. She is also the author of two other books and has won four Emmys, the John Chancellor Award, the Studs Terkel Community

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Maria Hinojosa: One-on-One. A Pulitzer Prize and Peabody Award winner, she was recently named an Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. She is also the author of two other books and has won four Emmys, the John Chancellor Award, the Studs Terkel Community
common experiences during these dreams, foundly therapeutic. Patients had many at once profoundly meaningful and pro-
near death—dreams, of sorts—that are to death that is almost universal: Patients observed that there is an experiential side the experiences of dying patients. Kerr has dedicated his career to understanding and Palliative Care, Buffalo, New York, and executive and medical officer at Hospice at a local hospice. Today, he is the chief As a young cardiology fellow, Dr. Dr. Christopher Kerr specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth. Meeting, which included reflections on the National Coming Out Day during a Morning Peter Becker '95 shared their thoughts on openly. Rachel Turer '25 and Head of School individuals who decide to come out and live Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights; commemorated the 1987 National March For 35 years, National Coming Out Day has led, and give them comfort going forward.” These dreams don’t deny the reality of past as death drew nearer. Explained Kerr, “These dreams of death, but instead validate the life that was
led, and give them comfort going forward.”

Welcome
Amanda Bohnsack, Director of Enrollment

AFTER A FIVE-MONTH, NATIONWIDE search, Head of School Peter Becker ’95 has appointed Amanda Bohnsack as Taft’s new director of enrollment. Bohnsack comes to Taft with deep experience in both admissions and secondary school placement, most recently as director of admission at Deerfield Academy. “Amanda’s love of boarding schools and the students and colleagues who com-
prise them, strategic thinking, leadership skills, commitment to making schools financially accessible and welcoming to first-generation students, and knowledge of the boarding school market position her to lead and grow Taft’s enrollment efforts and serve as a key member of Taft’s administrative team,” Becker said. The search was led by the execu-
tive search firm Isaacson, Miller. Two search advisory committees comprised of employees and trustees helped steer the search. The trustee committee was headed by J. Kingman Gordon ’88, P’89, P’90, P’91, and Kate Gemung Taylor ’85, P’22, ’24, ’26. The search advisory committee was thoroughly impressed with Amanda’s qualifications and experience,” said Gordon. “It’s a monumental task to follow in the steps of Peter Frew ’75 and Peru Wandelt ’66, but we’re so fortunate to have found the perfect person in Amanda to move Taft’s enrollment work forward.”
At Deerfield, Bohnsack directly supervised a team of 12 admission professionals and 26 faculty readers in a highly selective admissions process. Prior to her tenure at Deerfield, she was senior associ-
ate director of admissions at Hotchkiss and then served as the director of secondary school advising at Greenwich Country Day School, guiding families through the high school search and placement process. At Taft, Bohnsack will lead the 20-member Admissions Office, working closely with Head of School Peter Becker ’95 and Taft’s senior administrative team and board of trustees. She will be respon-
sible for maintaining and strengthening Taft’s position in the independent school marketplace, ensuring the enrollment of mission-appropriate students, and serv-
ing as a key ambassador for the school. Bohnsack inherited a committed team and the legacy of outgoing Director of Admissions Peter Frew ’75, who has played a crucial role in shaping Taft’s admissions success since 1985. “As we look forward to welcoming Amanda to our community in July 2024, I want to express my gratitude to Peter Frew ’75 for his dedication and contribu-
tions over the years,” Becker said. “Under his leadership, Taft has enrolled excep-
tional, competitive, and diverse classes, and we are grateful for his service. I know I speak for so many fellow alumni andTaft families when I express my grati-
tude for his holistic service to Taft and the sense of humor and positive energy he’s brought to Main Hall every day.”

Dr. Christopher Kerr
As a young cardiology fellow, Dr.
Dr. Christopher Kerr began working a side gig at a local hospice. Today, he is chief executive and medical officer at Hospice Palliative Care, Buffalo, New York, and has dedicated his career to understanding the experiences of dying patients. Kerr has observed that there is an experiential side to death that is almost universal: Patients have powerful inner experiences as they near death—dreams, of sorts—that are at once profoundly meaningful and profoundly therapeutic. Patients had many common experiences during these dreams, including seeing loved ones from their past as death drew nearer. Explained Kerr, “These dreams don’t deny the reality of death, but instead validate the life that was led, and give them comfort going forward.”

Rachel Turer ’25 and Peter Becker ’95
For 35 years, National Coming Out Day has commemorated the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights; the date honors the bravery of LGBTQ+ individuals who decide to come out and live openly. Rachel Turer ’25 and Head of School Peter Becker ’95 shared their thoughts on National Coming Out Day during a Morning Meeting, which included reflections on the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth.

Thomas Shadyac
American comedian, director, screenwriter, producer, author, actor, and university film professor Thomas Shadyac was this year’s Paley Lecturer. The youngest joke writer ever for comedian Bob Hope, Shadyac is widely known for writing and directing the comedy films Ace Ventura: Pet Detective, The Nutty Professor, Liar Liar, and Bruce Almighty. In 2010, Shadyac departed from comedic work to write, direct, and narrate the documentary film I Am

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Matilda!
The Musical

MATILDA WORMWOOD IS A PRECOCIOUS CHILD WHO LOVES TO READ. IT’S HER TELEKINETIC POWERS, THOUGH, THAT HELP HER NAVIGATE OBSTACLES AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL, AND FORM A BOND WITH HER TEACHER. IT’S A STORY OF AN EXCEPTIONAL CHILD, STAGED BY TAFT’S EXCEPTIONAL ACTORS, DANCERS, MUSICIANS, LIGHTS AND SOUND TEAMS, AND STAGE CREW.

Roald Dahl’s Matilda the Musical was presented through special arrangement with Music Theater International (MTI). All authorized performance materials were also supplied by MTI.
Move On!

STUDENT CHOREOGRAPHERS AND DANCERS EXPLORED THEMES OF FRIENDSHIP, PERSONAL GROWTH, BEAUTY IN ALL STAGES OF LIFE, EMPATHY, THE EMPOWERMENT AND INNATE FEMININITY OF BARBIE, AND MORE THROUGH MOVEMENT, MUSIC, LIGHTS, AND VIDEO DURING THE ANNUAL END-OF-TERM DANCE SHOWCASE.

The performances spanned a wide range of dance genres, each reflecting the deep talent, passion, personal insights, emotions, and objectives of the individual choreographers and dancers. The final piece was choreographed by Dance Teacher and Arts Department Head Sarah Surber and her Dance for Everyone Intro Class. BRAVO!

Taft Ceramics Teacher

Kiayani Douglas in Print

Kiayani Douglas created five pieces of art included in the book, Frankenstein Art Novel. She was one of 12 fine artists representing a range of mediums who contributed a total of 66 bespoke artworks to the Frankenstein Art Novel collection. All of the works were created in response to Frankenstein (1818) by Mary Shelley, and offer “a contemporary examination of humankind’s quest for knowledge, the role of women, and the hope and rage of society’s most ostracized.”

“The monster in the book Frankenstein was desperate to have his own family and be ‘free,’” says Douglas. “One of the pieces I created for the book is Elizabeth Douglas from Saint Kitts and Nevis. She was promised her freedom upon her enslavers’ death, but had to fight through court systems to gain that freedom for herself and her two boys decades later.”

Douglas was also part of a panel discussion at The Gertrude Club, New York, celebrating the release of the book. Douglas received her BFA in ceramics and an interdisciplinary MFA from The Hartford Art School. She studied across the Americas including El Salvador, Oakland, California, and Miami, Florida, with unique faculty including curator N’joo Wheadeon, and artists Mary Mattingly, Mark Dion, and Christy Gast. As an interdisciplinary portrait artist, Douglas uses her art to engage individuals in important conversations around race, history, and privilege. She has recently restored the oldest mural in Springfield, Massachusetts, originally painted by artist Donald Blanton in the late ’60s as a part of the Afro Cuba movement.


TAFT FACULTY MEMBER AND ARTIST

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Move On!

Bravo!

Through a competitive audition process, Taft artists Matt Romero ’25, Maddie Hsu ’25, Steven Zhang ’26, and Eden Thompson ’26 were chosen to perform at the 2024 Connecticut Northern Regional Music Festival. The Festival, sponsored by the Connecticut Music Educators Association (CMEA), was held in January. The CMEA Festival tradition dates back to 1936.

Dance Festival

Students in Ms. Surber’s Intermediate and Advanced Dance classes attended the annual New England Prep School Dance Festival at Ethel Walker School. They participated in master classes in various styles of dance, and shared a performance with dancers from Walker, Miss Porter’s, Loomis Chaffee, and Northfield Mount Hermon.

Pro Tips

Advanced and Intermediate Dance students studied hip-hop with guest educator and choreographer Cathlyn Hydeck. The fruits of their work were incorporated into some performance pieces during Taft’s annual Fall Dance Showcase.

Oriocos, Hydrox, and now, Miredos!

Taft’s new coed a cappella group made its debut in Lincoln Lobby. Miredos’s exceedingly talented members are, from left, Steven Zhang ’26, Jabari King ’26, Isaac Oweng ’26, Hannah Xu ’26, Maya Takanozoe ’26.
John Dayton ’64 to Receive Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal

IN RECOGNITION OF HIS STEADFAST loyalty and dedication to Taft, John Dayton ’64 will be honored with the 2024 Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal. The Medal is given each year to a person whose life work best reflects the essence of the Taft School motto: Not to be served but to serve.

“John Dayton ’64 exemplifies our school’s motto, Not to be served but to serve, in multiple ways,” said John Morrow II ’59, chair of the Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal Committee. “Throughout his life, John has given back, serving his community, his country, and his school. Taft has many outstanding graduates who are deserving of the school’s highest honor, the Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal, but none more worthy than John Dayton.”

After graduating from Taft in 1964, Dayton returned to his home state of Minnesota to attend the University of Minnesota at Morris. He graduated with a double major in English and speech and then joined the university’s staff, serving as the assistant director of admissions and teaching undergraduate speech. His teaching career was interrupted in 1969 by two years of service in the military.

With his military commitment completed, Dayton returned to his position at the University of Minnesota and then matriculated at the Texas Tech University School of Law in Lubbock, where he was a distinguished scholar, serving as an editor of the law review and graduating third in his law school class.

Following law school graduation, Dayton remained in Texas, joining the Dallas firm of Thompson, Knight, Simmons & Ballard, where he specialized in real estate law. After nearly a decade of active practice, he resigned from the firm and entered the restaurant business, opening South Street Cafe in Dallas. The restaurant’s five-star rating consistently kept it on the list of the nation’s premier restaurants. Dayton followed the success of his first restaurant with others. Baby Ruth in Dallas and Goodfellow’s and Texans in Minneapolis, consistently recognized among the Twin Cities’ premier dining establishments. He also opened a wholesale bakery and a hospital consulting firm in Minneapolis.

Dayton has been a devoted champion of the arts, serving as chair of the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts and chair and president of the board of the Dallas Opera, as well as on the boards of the Minnesota Orchestra, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Dallas Symphony, Bravo Vail, and the advisory boards of the Nasher Sculpture Center and Minnesota’s Walker Art Center. He was recognized for his extensive support of the arts in Dallas with the Norman Marius Silver Cup Award, bestowed annually upon one man and one woman “who believe in the power and beauty of art and have given selflessly to promote the excellence and accessibility of the arts in the Dallas community.”

Dayton is the immediate past-chair of Defenders of Wildlife, a national conservation organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of imperiled species and their habitats throughout North America. He also has served as chair of the Dallas County Youth Village, a residential treatment facility for juvenile offenders; as an executive committee member of the Dallas Zoological Society; and as a board member of ChildCare Dallas. He is on the advisory board of the Texas Women’s Foundation and is a trustee emeritus of the University of Minnesota Foundation. He has been a trustee of the Hendley School, the Eaglebrook School, and Taft, where he was a member of the board for 25 years.

In 2008, Dayton and his late wife, Arlene, were recognized with the Dallas Historical Society Award for Excellence in Community Service. In 2009, the couple was jointly awarded the Dallas Contemporary Legends Award for philanthropic service. Widowed in 2017, Dayton has two grown children who are Taft graduates, Chad ’93 and Whitney ’97.

“John is a true embodiment of dedication to community,” said Head of School Peter Becker ’95. “His contributions to the arts reveal his deep appreciation for and dedication to cultural enrichment. John’s philanthropic endeavors—serving on various boards, including several private schools as well as Taft—reflect his commitment to positively impacting people. We are so grateful for his years of service on Taft’s board of trustees and for his contributions in chairing the board’s admissions committee. Cheers to John—he is a true champion of the arts and a beacon of community service!”

John Dayton ’64, center, with his children and their spouses, from left, Chad ’93 and Negligé Dayton, Whitney Dayton Bruner ’97 and Christian Bruner.

The Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal is the school’s highest alumni honor and is given each year to a person whose life work best typifies the school motto: Not to be ministered to but to minister. The Horace Dutton Taft Alumni Medal is a reminder of Taft’s commitment to serve others.

Photo courtesy Helena Fifer

Time, Talent, Compassion, Fun! Students from Taft’s JV squash teams and theater program traveled to Waterbury to share their time and talents with students enrolled in after-school programming at the Rivera Memorial Foundation, which offers reading assistance, skill-building, health and safety workshops, nutrition, education, and more. In between academic prep and homework help, the group found time for a rousing game of dodgeball.

PHOTOS COURTESY NEJMA FIFER

Photos courtesy Nejma Fifer

PHOTOS COURTESY NEJMA FIFER
Fall Fest
Taft’s Red Rhino Fund is an endowed charitable fund run by a nine-member student board with faculty advisors. The Fund’s mission is an extension of the school motto, Not to be served but to serve. The group works to create positive change in the Greater Waterbury community for children by awarding monetary grants and promoting local organizations in support of education, literacy, and the arts. Grant dollars come from a variety of events held throughout the school year, including Spring Fling, Denim Day fundraisers, athletic tournaments, and a seasonal favorite—the annual Fall Festival (in photo), featuring pumpkin carving, games, cider and donuts, an obstacle course, and more.

Non ut Sibi
It was a command performance as Tafties returned to longtime local service partner Camp Mataucha for an afternoon of service and support. This time, Taft Theater students took center stage on the cleanup work at the camp. Mataucha is a YMCA summer camp serving children from more than a dozen area towns. Their traditional day camp program includes swimming, boating, archery, arts and crafts, group games, low and high ropes, a climbing tower, sports, and a nature program. Mataucha also offers specialty camps focused on fishing, aquatic activities, mountain biking, survival, and performing arts.

Rise Global Winner
ISABELLA Nascimento Silva Pinto ‘25 was recently named a Rise Global Winner. She was one of 100 Global Winners from 43 countries to become part of the newest Rise cohort.

Each year, Rise works to identify and recognize “promising young people,” ages 15–17, through an extensive application and review process; fewer than 10% of all applicants are named Global Winners. Founded in 2019, Rise is the flagship program of a $1 billion commitment by Eric and Wendy Schmidt to find and support global talent and encourage service and learning by providing support through four-year scholarships (including a living stipend), career services, and funding opportunities, including options to apply for seed money and grants for projects, and opportunities to work with other Global Winners. Rise collaborates with more than 60 partners from around the globe to identify and nurture talent from communities worldwide. In recognizing Isabella as a Global Winner, Rise acknowledged her passion “about the intersections of social justice, art, politics, and youth activism. Raised in a vibrant Brazilian community, she believes in service and collaboration as tools for social improvement.” Rise cites Isabella’s work as head of graphic design at an NGO, her roles as tutor and student leader at Taft, her efforts to introduce low-income Brazilian students to extracurricular opportunities, and her status as an alumna of Stanford’s Pre-Collegiate Studies and a multi-gold medalist in national Olympiads as predictors of her ability to significantly impact the global community throughout her lifetime as she continues to “leverage her knowledge and learning opportunities to uplift the lives of others.” Each Rise applicant is required to dedicate themselves to a passion project. Isabella’s project, “Cores do Brasil,” is an organization that supports elevating queer Brazilian individuals through sharing opportunities and fostering community. Isabella hopes to apply her artistic skills to help fight for social causes through visual storytelling and art.
Field Hockey Wins NEPSAC Class A Championship

In November, Field Hockey was crowned the NEPSAC Class A champions as they defeated Andover 3–2 in a thrilling back-and-forth game. The Rhinos found themselves up early, before falling behind 2–1, eventually scoring two more to reclaim the lead, and they never looked back. With the victory, they completed an undefeated season (the first time in school history), going 20–0–1, and winning the NEPSAC Class A championship for the first time since 1999.

Field Hockey

20–0–1
Founders League Champions
NEPSAC Class A Champions

Field hockey was crowned the NEPSAC Class A champions as they defeated Andover 3–2 in a thrilling back-and-forth game. Field hockey completed an undefeated season (the first time in school history), going 20–0–1, and winning the NEPSAC Class A championship for the first time since 1999.

Ariana Ftorek ’25 advancing up the field in game action against Andover during the NEPSAC Class A championship game in November.

Boys’ Soccer

15–1–4
Founders League Champions
NEPSAC Class A Finalists

After a fantastic regular season and two great victories in their quarter and semifinal matchups, boys’ soccer earned a spot in the NEPSAC Class A championship game where they faced Milton. They fought hard until the very end, before eventually falling 2–0 to the Mustangs. With this being their only loss of the season, they finished with an overall record of 15–1–4, and as the NEPSAC Class A runner-ups.

Preston Alessio ’25 in game action versus Worcester during the NEPSAC Class A SemiFinal game in November.
Boys’ Cross Country

3–2
THIRD PLACE, FOUNDERS LEAGUE TOURNAMENT
NINTH PLACE, NEPSTA DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIP

Boys’ cross country rounded out their season with a third-place finish in the Founders League Tournament, before heading to the NEPSTA Division 1 championship, where five out of seven runners finished before the 18-minute mark, and placed ninth overall out of 15 teams.

Tate Celebi ’25 during an October meet versus Kent.

Girls’ Cross Country

4–1
SECOND PLACE, FOUNDERS LEAGUE TOURNAMENT
SEVENTH PLACE, NEPSTA DIVISION I CHAMPIONSHIP

Girls’ cross country ended their season on a high note, finishing second in the Founders League Tournament before competing in the NEPSTA Division 1 championship race held at Loomis, where each varsity runner recorded a personal best time and they finished seventh overall.

Kate Cicchetti ’24 racing in an October meet versus Kent.

Girls’ Soccer

9–6–3

Renata Mercedes ’25 heads up the field against Greenwich Country Day in September.

Boys’ Soccer

3–5

Logan Reed ’26 looks to gain yards after a catch against Kent in October.
Volleyball

5–12

Marta Sukovic ‘25 looks to finish the point against Berkshire in September.

FALL 2023 ATHLETIC AWARDS

Field Hockey
Field Hockey Award—Maisy Ricciardelli ’24
NEPSAC Player of the Year—Maisy Ricciardelli ’24
All-NEPSAC—Truus van Wees ’24, Rachel Turner ’25, Emily Smith ’25
NEPSAC Honorable Mention—Brittney Page ’25, Gamble Tumma ’26, Devon Watson ’25

Boys’ Soccer
Livingston Carroll Soccer Award—Enoch Duodu ’24
All-NEPSAC—Preston Alessio ’25, Henry Bacon ’24, Enoch Duodu ’24
NEPSAC Honorable Mention—Patrick Gallagher ’24, Joaquin Mañon ’25, Marcos Santana ’26

Girls’ Soccer
1976 Girls’ Soccer Award—Faith Graziano ’24

Boys’ Cross Country
John B. Small Boys’ Cross Country Award—
All-NEPSAC ’24, Trevor Stellmach ’24
NEPSAC—Late Celito ’25

Girls’ Cross Country
Girls’ Cross Country Award—Sydney Grogan ’24
All-NEPSAC—Charlotte Murphy ’25

Football
Black Cup Award—Michael Pangaro ’24
Harry K. Cross Football Award—Gunnar Watson ’24
All-NEPSAC—Andres Crew ’24
NEPSAC Honorable Mention—Michael Pangaro ’24

Volleyball
Volleyball Award—Katherine Erbstein ’24, Sara Takambe ’24
NEPSAC Honorable Mention—Lucy Schwab ’24

The energy was high, the determination deep, and the Red Rally message clear: The Rhinos were ready to show the Bearcats how it is done on Hotchkiss Day!

In November, the Rhinos traveled to Lakeville for this year’s Hotchkiss Day. Football (24–6) and boys’ soccer (5–0) captured victories, field hockey played to a 1–1 tie, and girls’ soccer (2–0) and volleyball (3–0) were handed losses.
D’Arco Cup

IN EARLY DECEMBER, BOYS’ VARSITY HOCKEY fell to the Berkshire Bears 4–3 in the annual Lucille A. D’Arco Cup. Lucille was a passionate fan and supporter of both schools: Her son, Brad ’99, captained the Taft team as a student, then went on to coach the Berkshire team after college. In 2008, Lucille lost a courageous battle with breast cancer. Since then, the two schools have honored her legacy on the ice in a game dedicated to her memory, to raising funds and awareness around breast cancer, and to commemorate the D’Arco family’s involvement with and love for both institutions.

40th Annual Patsy K. Odden Girls’ Invitational Hockey Tournament

THE 40TH ANNUAL PATSY K. ODDEN GIRLS’ INVITATIONAL HOCKEY TOURNAMENT took place on Thursday, December 14 and Friday, December 15. The teams that competed in this year’s tournament were Taft, Choate, Hotchkiss, Kent, Lawrenceville, Loomis Chaffee, Phillips Andover, and Tabor. After two full days of games, Loomis and Andover faced off in the championship game, with Loomis taking home the tournament title.

FALL & WINTER SIGNING CEREMONIES

Twenty-six student-athletes (11 in the fall, 15 in the winter) participated in Taft’s first two National Signing Ceremonies for the school year in Bingham Auditorium. The ceremonies celebrated students who made commitments to continue their academic and athletic careers at the college or university level. Coaches, families, teammates, and the full Taft School community were invited to the events.

FALL SIGNING CEREMONY

Congratulations to:
Field Hockey
Maisy Ricciardelli ‘24, Boston College
Women’s Lacrosse
Truus van Wees ‘24, University of Michigan
Men’s Lacrosse
Bennett Raphalian ‘24, Rutgers University
Sam Lovell ‘24, United States Naval Academy
Harry Attell ‘24, University of Rochester
Luke Jamin ‘24, University of Virginia
Tristen Bach ‘24, United States Naval Academy
Harry Revenaugh ‘24, Middlebury College

WINTER SIGNING CEREMONY

Congratulations to:
Men’s Soccer
Henry Bacon ‘24, Babson College
Bennett Revenaugh ‘24, Middlebury College
Enoch Oluoma ‘24, Wesleyan University
Men’s Squash
Rostand Olama ‘24, Bucknell University

Women’s Soccer
Faith Graziaro ‘24, University of Miami

Men’s Lacrosse
Ben Friedman ‘24, Yale University
Teddy Sachs ‘24, Trinity College
Matthew Surr ‘24, Yale University
Men’s Water Polo
Quinn Whipple ‘24, University of Pennsylvania

Football
Josh Kuczynski ‘24, Amherst College
Braden MacDonald ‘24, United States Naval Academy

Since 1964 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has recognized commitments between student athletes and Division I and II athletics programs through their National Letter of Intent (NLI) program. The program now includes 676 Division I and II participating institutions.
INTENTIONAL AND Consequential

BY DEBRA MEYERS
PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO PRODUCTION BY ROBERT FALCETTI
Kiayani Douglas earned a B.F.A. in ceramics and an interdisciplinary M.F.A. from the Hartford Art School. As an interdisciplinary portrait artist, Douglas uses her art to engage individuals in important conversations around social justice narratives. She was one of 12 artists chosen to create bespoke artwork for the Frankenstein Art Novel, a contemporary exploration of the 1818 Mary Shelley novel with an emphasis on nature and feminine power. Douglas also recently restored the oldest mural in Springfield, Massachusetts, originally painted by artist Donald Blanton in the late 1960s. She continues to show her work in galleries across the region.

"I became a ceramics major because I realized the limitless opportunities for connection to science and math that I could have while still making beautiful things," says Douglas. "As a practicing artist outside of school, it is really important to me to show how art shows up in real life and how those critical thinking aspects are ways for us to really challenge what we know and what we understand."

"ART IS THE MOST ELEMENTAL FORM OF EXPRESSION. IT CHALLENGES THE MIND, FILLS UP THE SOUL, AND INSPIRES INNOVATION. IT IS ROOTED IN IMAGINATION, SHAPED BY CREATIVITY, AND NURTURED BY PASSION. IT IS TACTILE, CEREBRAL, PHYSICAL, AND EMOTIVE.

"OUR STUDENTS WORK WITH THEIR HANDS, VOICES, BODIES, HEARTS, AND MINDS TO CREATE SOMETHING ORIGINAL—something that they alone envisioned, cultivated, and followed through to completion," says Taft Arts Department Head and Dance Teacher Sarah Suter. "The idea of moving something from concept to process to product to pride in achievement stays with students who study the arts as they enter the world outside of Taft—in college, in careers, and in parenthood—and helps them find success in those spaces."

Embracing the consequential nature of arts in education is a part of Taft’s history. The school’s foundational mission to educate the whole student acknowledges the vital role art plays in shaping the spirit, intellect, and lives of Taft students and alumni. Now, more than 130 years after the school’s founding, Taft students are required to take at least one semester of art in each academic year. In doing so, they choose from nearly 50 classes encompassing music, fine arts, performing arts, and film; they may also choose from a range of Afternoon Program arts offerings, clubs, programs, and activities. Along the way, they learn from a dozen arts faculty members, most with advanced degrees, and almost all, Suter notes, "active artists, practicing their craft and leading by example."

"They are passionate about their mediums and committed to training and inspiring high-level students to go deeper into self-discovery and innovation, while offering new artists a window into all of the ways art can enrich their lives," says Suter. "Each faculty member also works to bridge the gap between the emerging artists and those creating at a higher level by building programs that allow for progression, creating space for students to grow from foundational levels into mature, confident, accomplished young artists."

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The principle of progression is clear in the photography curriculum, notes Yee-Fun Yin. His introductory level photography classes are "totally analog and hands-on," with a focus on 35mm manual mode settings and shooting with black-and-white film, which students also learn to develop. In the more advanced classes, they use that technical knowledge base to explore and experiment, ultimately identifying preferred equipment and mediums while building a creative body of work.

"Images are intentional and consequential, and this is what I want my students to learn," Yin explains. "All of this is to get students to a point of visual literacy."

And while applied visual literacy elevates the photographic work produced by Yin’s students, it also enhances and advances actualized learning across the visual arts curriculum.

Visual literacy, at its core, is the ability to read, write, and create visual images. Fluency brings an understanding of things like angles and perspectives, layout and composition, light, color, and framing. Meghan Balliett and John O’Reilly teach a range of fine arts courses that both develop and employ this fluency, including from Art and the Natural World and Drawing and Design, to Intermediate Painting and Drawing, 3D Design, and Advanced Studio Art.

"Art allows students to become strong visual thinkers," says Balliett. "It helps them develop their imaginations and problem-solving skills, and to explore new ways of thinking and seeing the world."

My projects and assignments are designed to help students see their true potential, and build a really strong visual arts foundation."

— John O’Reilly
Applied Visual Literacy: Reading Images Is Just the Beginning

“My own journey with art history began when I was a high school student in Ralph Nordland’s class,” recalls Art History Teacher Alex Werrell. “He would turn off the lights and the hum of the great machine that he called the ‘dinosaur’ would start. Marvelous images would flash on the board, and we’d be transported through history to a different world—to the Renaissance era in Florence, to Ancient Rome, to the Revolutionary War in America. Every day was a new adventure.” And a new feeling. Werrell closes his eyes as he shares his memory of Mr. Nordland’s class. It is clear that in his mind, he is back in his high school classroom. He is smiling; his body language is softer. Art is technical. It is also emotional.

“What I hope students can bring out of art history is not just expressionism, so to speak—not just the ability to speak about art, to analyze art, to look at the world around them and draw conclusions from it—but also impressionism. I also want them to take art personally. I want them to be able to look at a piece on a wall that they haven’t seen before and to feel immersed in the art. To feel informed by it and to feel some part of them speaking to it. There’s a reason why we escape to galleries, and it is not just to lose ourselves in the rhythm of the day; it’s also to immerse ourselves in the world of art where you can look around and just feel.”

Like Yin’s photography students, Heather Dawson’s film students create new worlds through the lens of a camera. An Emmy Award-winning director and producer, Dawson has been a visual storyteller for more than 20 years. She shares her knowledge and experience with students through The Art of Visual Storytelling, Digital Film Production, and Advanced Filmmaking classes. By immersing themselves in worlds imagined by some of American cinema’s best filmmakers, Dawson’s students first learn to “read” a film. They study tools and technique, scriptwriting, storyboarding, and film editing. More advanced students form an on-campus production company and work collaboratively to create high-quality documentary and narrative short films.

“There is such power in the art of visual storytelling that really has the ability to inspire us and teach us and show us different perspectives,” Dawson notes. “Studies have shown that by watching films, we gain a deeper sense of empathy, and I think that’s really important to teach our students.”

― Heather Dawson

― Alex Werrell
DAWSON IS NOT ALONE IN EMBRACING THE IDEA THAT ART ILLUMINATES EMPATHY. It is something Acting and Public Speaking Teacher Helena Fifer thinks about, as well.

“In my public speaking class, I encourage kids to share their own stories—to make connections with the audience through personal stories that are both genuine and specific,” Fifer explains. “What I notice happens after the first couple of weeks is that kids really bond with each other. They really support each other and encourage each other to take risks in the class. It is an approach that teaches and fosters empathy.”

Fifer’s public speaking and acting classes allow students to develop practical skills to carry into any classroom, boardroom, and, of course, any stage. In her 27 years at Taft, Fifer has directed and produced an impressive catalog of plays and musicals for the Bingham and Black Box theaters. There have been mussing musicals, poignant plays, comedic romps, and works with powerful messages, including last spring’s Cabaret. It was the production of The Addams Family, though, that seemed to stand out for its extraordinary artistic achievement.

The cast itself was deeply talented. Jaw-dropping sets, choreography, music, lights and sound, hair and makeup, staging, and props came together to produce what can only be described as theater magic. Taft’s academic arts courses—including those in stagecraft, theater technology, and design—prepare students technically for such an achievement; working on live productions allows them to turn theory into practice.

“Technical theater gives students the opportunity to do things they wouldn’t normally do to be creative: to paint, and not in a creative way; to build; to problem solve; to explore new avenues in a different format and in an environment they might not have thought of as being a problem-solving or creative space,” says Technical Theater Director Rob Dawson. “Theater production is a style of teamwork that is not a sport—there are no points scored, there are no goals—but everyone works together to ensure the success of the play and players.”

The theater tech team building and painting sets in the scene shop.
Making Art:
PLACES AND SPACES

From Main Hall and the Arts and Humanities wing, to Taft’s properties on The Green and DeForest Street, arts spaces dot the extended Taft campus. Main Hall venues begin with Bingham Auditorium on one end; the Choral Room, Lincoln Lobby (a sweet spot for a cappella sound), and Mark W. Potter Gallery line the pathway to the Arts wing. The wing begins at the Main Hall intersection connecting CPT and HDT Halls. To the right and in a multilevel space live the Woodward “Black Box” Theater, a video production classroom, the Pailey Dance Studio, the Gail Wynne Sculpture and Ceramics Studio, the digital recording studio in The Bristol Music Room, photography darkrooms, a digital design lab, and a number of music class and practice rooms, some equipped with pianos. Skip the right-hand turn, proceed down Main Hall toward the dining halls, and climb a flight of stairs to find the Tremaine Art Studio, home to Taft’s painting, drawing, and design classes. Most of the spaces get the job done well; many are beginning to show their age. Relatively recent upgrades to Bingham and Black Box have been a boon to those broadly used spaces.

“Our studios are active and vibrant, and provide a comfortable and essential space on campus for our students to feel relaxed and at home so that they can be free to be creative, innovative, and vulnerable,” notes Arts Department Head Sarah Surber. “Ideally and perhaps in the future, those studios and spaces will be in closer proximity to one another so that all of the amazing things happening in our individual studios can be shared with each other, seen by each other, and maybe even inspire each other to explore new mediums at new levels of creativity so that we are feeding the artistic life at Taft together, as one. This would allow the artists on campus to collaborate more fully and feel a sense of community within the arts.”
DAWSON SPEAKS OF ARE A PRODIGIOUS GROUP OF TALENTED STUDENT ARTISTS, TEACHERS, AND ARTS PROFESSIONALS. Each brings something extraordinarily unique yet wholly synergistic to the process. And each stands alone as an artist outside of the theater. The body of work—the training and experience—of a Taft musician or dancer is far greater than the pieces they lend to the stage.

T.J. Thompson’s instrumental music teachings include jazz, classical, improvisation, and electronic music in Taft’s Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) Lab.

On campus, his students perform in formal concerts, accompany Taft theater and Collegium Musicum, and host informal performances in the Jig and on the Jig Patio. In the community, they have accompanied performances at a local opera house, sermons at local churches, joined parades, and performed with Thompson’s professional trio. They audition for and earn spots in music competitions. They have played Carnegie Hall, toured the Czech Republic, Prague, and Texas. And, as often as they can, they spend spring break learning and performing in New Orleans, taking the stage in the French Quarter’s historic Preservation Hall.

Collaborating with musicians across the globe gets our students thinking about why they play music, how they enjoy music, and why they enjoy playing music with one another,” says Thompson.

“‘To be part of a group doing many different things in harmony gives me a lot of optimism. To paraphrase my teachers and some of my inspirations, the more collaborative the music is, the more powerful and transformative it can be.’

Directed by Bruce Fifer, Taft’s Collegium Musicum is a study in collaboration. Members of the showcase choir breathe new life into classical masterworks. Collegium members also perform at Taft and around the world. They were the core vocal ensemble in an artistic residency program in Faicchio, Italy, and have performed in Austria, China, the Czech Republic, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain. Domestically, their concert tours have taken them coast to coast.

“Every time I stand up and connect with them in a performance, I’m actually looking at them and communicating with them, getting into their soul, and they’re getting into mine—there’s a magic that happens,” says Fifer.

There are opportunities for vocal music study, lessons, and performance at every level at Taft. From Canto and Honors Music Theory to a cappella groups, theater roles, Taft’s professional recording studio, the annual multicultural arts celebration, and coffeehouses, Taft vocal artists fill Taft’s halls with a joyful expression.
Self-expression through art is at the core of both process and product in dance. Taft’s dance program is robust, progressive, powerful, and connected to a broader dance community outside Taft’s walls. It is an inclusive program, welcoming dancers at every level, and with a range of intentions. The program is built on a strong foundation in technique, exposure to a wide variety of dance forms, and opportunities to perform and choreograph at every level. Those new to dance explore the basics through Dance for Everyone, experiencing a range of dance genres while increasing their body awareness, strength, flexibility, coordination, and musicality. Intermediate and advanced students may nurture their love and passion for different forms of dance while honing their technique. Through World Dance Appreciation, artists explore culture through dance, deepening their understanding of the universal nature of dance as a form of expression. Through professional dance company residencies, master classes, guest teachers and choreographers, participation in regional dance festivals and travel to professional performances, students fully engage with the art of dance and all its possibilities.

“Dance has given me so much throughout my life,” says Surber. “It has given me a sense of identity, confidence, and a connection to my body that allowed me to feel how strong and powerful I could be. It gave me a way to express myself when my words couldn’t. I hope that through teaching, I can instill some of that in my students as well. I hope to cultivate the artist within each dancer.” And perhaps that is the goal of each Taft’s arts teacher—to cultivate the artist within. To help each student find their artistic voice—to embrace it and nurture it, to celebrate their passion, and then, if we are lucky, to share it with the world.

Above: Dance classes are held in the Pailey Dance Studio, a vast, bright space with high ceilings and mirrored walls. Fun fact: Formerly two squash courts, the space was reimagined and rededicated in 2001.
Opposite page: From the winter Dance Ensemble Concert in Bingham Auditorium.

Sarah Surber
DANCE

Above: Dance classes are held in the Pailey Dance Studio, a vast, bright space with high ceilings and mirrored walls. Fun fact: Formerly two squash courts, the space was reimagined and rededicated in 2001.

Opposite page: From the winter Dance Ensemble Concert in Bingham Auditorium.
Every year I have my senior students write me a letter for their first homework assignment. In the letter, they have to introduce themselves; they are asked to explain why they want to take the class, and what they love about English. So, after a few excellent introductory classes, I began reading the letters, which were thoughtful and detailed, but I noticed this repeated reference to technology, one that I hadn’t observed in previous years. One student wrote, “My use of technology has really impacted the way I write.” Another included the line, “I used to be able to read for longer periods of time, and while I still like to read, it’s not as easy as it was when I was younger, before I had my iPhone.” A few other authors detailed how they felt generally distracted and worried about how they would adjust their device use now that the summer was over. I found these reflections to be really curious, as I hadn’t even asked my students to consider their relationship to technology or how it might relate to their work in class as part of the assignment; it was just something on their minds. And honestly, my use of technology—particularly my reliance on my phone—is something that I spend a lot of time thinking about, too.

I marked a few important milestones in 2023. For instance, this is my 20th year of teaching. This spring, I celebrated my 25th Reunion with fellow graduates of The Taft School Class of 1998. In many ways, my professional career runs parallel to the emergence and rise of social media and smartphones. Given my experience with digital technologies and my familiarity with Taft both before and after their emergence, I want to share some of my experiences with how the school—and our time in it—is shaped by our technology use. I also want us to question our use of technology as both a community and as individuals.

As recently as the late 1990s, all communication at Taft was paper-based and largely centralized. Team practice schedules as well as club meeting times and locations were posted on Main Board, which was very much connected to assembly, so people would make announcements about clubs or groups or games on Wednesday or Saturday mornings, and then add, “Check Main Board for the details.” In my memory there was always a group of students clustered in front of and staring at the bulletin board adjacent to the mailroom. In fact, the nearby mailroom, which not only handled and hand-delivered everything from birthday cards to...
With each other.”

“Because of our phones, we are forever elsewhere.” Let’s consider a few real-life examples of this and their impact.

My ongoing wondering about device use and its impact led me to design and teach a senior English elective called Media and Identity. Since it first ran in the fall of 2019, I have been amazed at my students’ willingness to candidly write about and discuss their phone use. They alternately resent and feel compelled to be connected to their phones and how social media has created a “third rail” of expectations, pressures, and experiences. In fact, they worry about younger students and siblings given their digital media consumption. Notably, none of my students has ever said they wished they got a smartphone at an earlier age or that they aspired to spend more time on social media. In his book Stolen Focus, Johann Hari refers to this concept as “living in the gap.” We know that our internet and device use are problematic, and yet we just can’t seem to do anything about them. Part of the reason why this is so hard is because there are wildly powerful forces behind these technologies that have developed digital experiences designed to steal our time and divide our attention because it is extremely profitable. And I want to make it clear: Although things were different in the ’90s, there were always distractions. I mean, we were checking our mailboxes 20 times a day. Distraction is a part of life.

However, all sense of normal distraction has been accelerated on our now hyper-connected reality. Our attention seems to be constantly fractured. As Sherry Turkle wrote in her book, Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age, “Because of our phones, we are forever elsewhere.” Let’s consider a few real-life examples of this and their impact.
It is sort of like when a boat gets tipped slightly off balance; it needs time to right itself again. When this happens, your performance drops, you’re slower. So when you’re checking text messages while trying to study, you lose time to texting, but you also lose the time it takes to refocus afterward. So while my Screen Time shows I am using my device for five hours a day, I’m actually losing much more time than that because I have to constantly refocus on the tasks at hand. Simply having your phone on and looking at it means that you are switching tasks. Other research studies show that having a smartphone within sight or within easy reach reduces a person’s ability to focus and perform tasks because part of their brain is actively working to not pick up or use the phone.

Here’s a related scenario. You’re walking towards a teacher or student you don’t know. Do you think about glancing at your phone a few times to avoid eye contact? Looking at your phone is a guaranteed dopamine hit, and it can often feel like the easier choice than a real-time, potentially “awkward” encounter. Relatably, psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair found in her 2013 study that many adolescents refuse to communicate face to face and prefer to conduct their disagreements by texting instead. Our device use has collective implications on our ability to empathize and be fully present with each other. We can see this writ large in everyday interactions. For instance, let’s say you’re chatting with a friend. Your friend gets a text. They look at their phone, and their focus is increasing by their phone. What do you do? You take out your phone. This is a phenomenon known as “phubbing”—snubbing + phone. Habitual phubbing leads to lesser relationship satisfaction and it also leads to more phone use. So, when we see a lot of phone use around us, we tend to then look down and use our own phones more. Where does that leave us in the big picture? Nationally, empathy has declined; we are less likely to take the perspective of other people or demonstrate concern for others. We learn empathy and understanding by watching how actions affect other people, and you can’t really do that behind a screen or device. Particularly if you habituate social media sites that simply reflect back what you already believe like some kind of digital echo chamber. Jaron Lanier wrote in his book, “Phubbing is a gift. Don’t fill it with scrolling. Just think. Just rest. Mind wandering is when you can be your most creative.”

The research is clear: Humans cannot multitask, in fact, this was a term developed to describe computer processors in the 1960s. The cost of constant switching—say you get a text message in the middle of reading your English homework during study hall—is that you not only lose focus, but your brain has to reorient and remember what you were doing before.

BE HERE NOW

Now, I’m not saying the ’90s were utopian, but I hope we might consider the following elements of device use over the next few months individually and together:

1. Read the terms and conditions for a social media platform that you use. You don’t have to give it up, but you might be surprised to learn what the platform can do with your images and content.

2. Like all Taft teachers, I have my students leave their phones by the door at the start of each period. But if you’re grabbing your phone at the end of a class like you’re coming up for air after being under water, and you’re using your phone all the way to the next class, you’re setting up your brain for another cognitive switch that extends into the next period. So, take one day and commit to leaving your phone in your room. Or give your phone to the faculty member on duty during study hall. Give it a try. See how it goes.

3. Boredom is a gift. Don’t fill it with scrolling. Just think. Just rest. Mind wandering is when you can be your most creative.

4. Consider not using your phone in the hour before you go to bed. Put it somewhere far away from where you sleep. Most professional athletes employ sleep coaches to further emphasize these habits.

BE HERE NOW

Here’s a related scenario. You’re walking towards a teacher or student you don’t know. Do you think about glancing at your phone a few times to avoid eye contact? Looking at your phone is a guaranteed dopamine hit, and it can often feel like the easier choice than a real-time, potentially “awkward” encounter. Relatably, psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair found in her 2013 study that many adolescents refuse to communicate face to face and prefer to conduct their disagreements by texting instead. Our device use has collective implications on our ability to empathize and be fully present with each other. We can see this writ large in everyday interactions. For instance, let’s say you’re chatting with a friend. Your friend gets a text. They look at their phone, and their focus is increasing by their phone. What do you do? You take out your phone. This is a phenomenon known as “phubbing”—snubbing + phone. Habitual phubbing leads to lesser relationship satisfaction and it also leads to more phone use. So, when we see a lot of phone use around us, we tend to then look down and use our own phones more. Where does that leave us in the big picture? Nationally, empathy has declined; we are less likely to take the perspective of other people or demonstrate concern for others. We learn empathy and understanding by watching how actions affect other people, and you can’t really do that behind a screen or device. Particularly if you habituate social media sites that simply reflect back what you already believe like some kind of digital echo chamber. Jaron Lanier wrote in his book, “Phubbing is a gift. Don’t fill it with scrolling. Just think. Just rest. Mind wandering is when you can be your most creative.”

The research is clear: Humans cannot multitask, in fact, this was a term developed to describe computer processors in the 1960s. The cost of constant switching—say you get a text message in the middle of reading your English homework during study hall—is that you not only lose focus, but your brain has to reorient and remember what you were doing before.

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Now, I’m not saying the ’90s were utopian, but I hope we might consider the following elements of device use over the next few months individually and together:

1. Read the terms and conditions for a social media platform that you use. You don’t have to give it up, but you might be surprised to learn what the platform can do with your images and content.

2. Like all Taft teachers, I have my students leave their phones by the door at the start of each period. But if you’re grabbing your phone at the end of a class like you’re coming up for air after being under water, and you’re using your phone all the way to the next class, you’re setting up your brain for another cognitive switch that extends into the next period. So, take one day and commit to leaving your phone in your room. Or give your phone to the faculty member on duty during study hall. Give it a try. See how it goes.

3. Boredom is a gift. Don’t fill it with scrolling. Just think. Just rest. Mind wandering is when you can be your most creative.

4. Consider not using your phone in the hour before you go to bed. Put it somewhere far away from where you sleep. Most professional athletes employ sleep coaches to further emphasize these habits.
On a nice spring or fall day, there isn’t anything students like hearing more than “Let’s meet outside today.” We are very lucky to have one of the best “outdoor classrooms” around from I-Block classes on the Jig Patio to environmental science and history classes pondside, generations of Tafties have enjoyed the best 226-acre classroom in Connecticut.

—Beth Nolan Lovallo ’93

The Leslie D. Manning Archives

1. Fresh air helped with some lab assignments last year.
2. This photo was taken shortly after the Hulbert Taft Jr. Library opened in 1968. The patio made the perfect outdoor classroom!
4. A warm sunny afternoon on the Jig Patio helps keep the discussion flowing in 2019.
Taft’s new engineering club braved the cold in January to plan and create this colorful feat of engineering: the Taft Igloo!

WILLIAM YANG ’26