

What I Tell New Parents About the Upper School

by Dennis L. Calkins

I hope it is evident to every new or prospective parent of an Upper School student that one of my most enjoyable tasks is talking about our fine Upper School. My remarks often include the answers to three questions:

What makes us unique?

What makes us superior?

How should the quality of any school be judged?

What makes us unique? The two characteristics that set us apart from every other school in the country are the modular schedule and the advisor-advisee system. Neither of these characteristics exists for sole purpose of making us unique. We believe the modular schedule provides students with the opportunity to become responsible decision-makers and allows for a wealth of opportunities to learn and grow — opportunities that do not exist in other schools using traditional schedules. And, we believe that every student needs the attention of a faculty member assigned as a caretaker and mentor — someone whose responsibility it is to make sure that every student is known as an individual and whose unique learning needs can be addressed.

What makes us superior? There are many possible answers to this question but I am always drawn to three characteristics:

First, our curriculum reflects our belief that how you learn to use your mind is more important than what you know. Our faculty continues to be pro-active in designing courses and learning experiences for every student that challenge them to develop their higher order thinking skills.

Second, we believe that the Upper School experience should be rigorous. Too many schools do not challenge their students, are reluctant to ask them to work hard, are afraid to set the bar at a high level. We believe that every student must learn to deal with setbacks and shortcomings and be challenged every day to reach higher.

Third, and by far the most important, what makes us (or any school, for that matter) excellent is the quality of our faculty. Because we are fortunate to have a talented and dedicated faculty, all of the other important characteristics have a greater chance of falling into place.

And finally, how should the quality of any school be judged? I ask prospective parents to listen to what other schools say about themselves and to take note of who receives the attention. If schools concentrate on the accomplishments of their best and brightest, their most athletic, their most gifted, their most talented, it is easy to see what is important to them. Almost every school has its list of high achievers and it shouldn't be necessary to compare the length of our list to that of other schools. In my view, schools should emphasize the opportunities afforded to every student in the school, the requirements every student is asked to fulfill, the experiences every student will take part in — the modular schedule, the advisor-advisee system, the cutting-edge curriculum, the rigor of the program, the outstanding faculty. The quality of any school should only be judged by the importance it places on providing the best possible experiences for every student. Based on that criterion alone, it is always a pleasure to talk about the quality of the Upper School.