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Connecting with college education: a holistic approach

Stefanos Gialamas and Peggy Pelonis explain how the American Community Schools of Athens have made a bridge between school and university

Educating the individual as a whole is a feat for many universities. Similar trends are noted in the K-12 educational environment where students learn in a variety of academic areas as well as in athletics, community service and civic responsibility.

We would like to define this inclusive model as the Holistic, Meaningful, and Harmonious (HMH) approach to education as we believe that it may lay the foundation for success in higher education and, more importantly, for life itself. Educators are well aware that teaching and learning does not only take place in the classroom but also in the playground, during activities, in assemblies, during group projects and in both team and individual sports. The seeds planted during the K-12 years eventually blossom and continue to grow in higher education.

However, numerous questions arise regarding the sustainability of secondary education and transferring secondary school knowledge to higher education. They include questions such as: how many of the skills learned in primary and secondary education really do transfer to ensure student success? Are students able to apply what they have learned from one situation to another? From one culture to another? How well do we indeed understand learning styles? And how difficult is it for institutions to provide bridging skills for young people during their time of transition?

If we are to take education to the next level, to unite the best of secondary and higher education, we must consider the gap in between by building a 'bridge' between the past, the present and the future. The bridging method proposed requires a reciprocal understanding of both worlds by both entities.

Our experience in higher education leaves no doubt that the most successful student entering college is the student that is happy with the institution as well as the subject they have chosen. What then ensures a happy student? It is making sure that there is a match made in heaven; a perfect fit. This involves knowing the student and knowing the higher education institution.

Knowing the student goes beyond academics. It means collecting information and putting pieces of the puzzle together that will create a picture of who the student really is. We refer to this as the Holistic approach and it considers all aspects of 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 2002). It means understanding and successfully combining academic, emotional, physical, intellectual and ethical components to ensure a healthy, balanced individual, an individual who will successfully cope with the changes involved when entering higher education as well as the changes that life brings (Pelonis, 2001).

The educational experience, however, must be meaningful for the learner. Meaningful refers to being in line with one's principles and values, with one's personal and professional goals. The learner should see it as part of his/her life and not in isolation of knowledge; it must be meaningful in relation to his/her dreams, strengths, desires and talents.

Discovering the feeling of being 'in love with life and learning' gives life meaning and thus there is a personal interest in making 'living' desirable. Harmonious refers to the idea that all dimensions must be in harmony, much as an orchestra works in harmony with the conductor. Moreover, education must be sustainable, and thus cannot only be based on acquiring skills and learning a trade but must be based on critical thinking, being creative and sharpening decision-making skills. Most importantly, all of the above must rely on defined principles and values in order to enhance the concept of living a full life and a sustaining ethos, as defined by the ancient Greeks.

ACS Athens not only adopts, endorses, embraces and promotes the HMH model of education for its students; it also exemplifies this model through its faculty, administration and staff by their behaviour and daily action. Students are invited to participate in adopting this model throughout their school career.

As early as freshman year for example, students are taught to begin thinking about putting together what we refer to as the Portfolio: All About Me (PAAM). The portfolio includes a variety of pieces that will eventually come together to form the puzzle of each student. It is the x-ray of the student's personality and a reflection of their achievements. This process inspires the students to understand themselves better by seeing the whole picture of who they are. Thus, learning and the learner become one. Students are both reflectors and creators.

The PAAM encourages students to include information about activities, hobbies, community service and also includes a peer recommendation. The process invites students to consider their role(s) in their immediate and broader community, how others view them and whether this is in alignment with how they would like to be viewed or think they are viewed. It encourages students to focus on their assets, strengths and experiences and how these contribute to their academic goals as well as to their personality in terms of what they have to offer in higher education.

The PAAM encourages discussions with parents, peers and teachers and thus guides students through a decision-making process prior to their senior year so that, by the final year, they are

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prepared to make informed decisions about their future. As the PAAM comes together, the college advisor also observes the process with which each student approaches the formation of the portfolio and in guiding the students to put all pieces together, the guidance counsellor will get to know the student in all or most aspects of their personality.

Furthermore, students are guided to complete a variety of questionnaires used to aid the counsellor in writing recommendation letters but in essence continue to encourage self-reflection. The Counsellor Information Gathering Form (CIGF) is designed with questions about academic, social and personal experiences that have been pivotal in the student's development. The student is asked about challenges they have overcome, role models they respect and life events that have shaped who they are becoming. The CIGF also includes a section to be completed by parents, as they know their child in ways unknown to the counsellor and can provide significant insights.

The second prerequisite for ensuring the right fit is knowing the higher educational institutions. This means investing time and energy, not only to research schools, understand programmes and highlight admissions criteria, but to get to know the institution by getting to know its people. Thus, developing a truthful and meaningful relationship with its representatives is a vital step in order to ensure that the information exchanged is accurate. Trust therefore develops between representatives as each begins to speak a common language with a common goal in mind: to accurately match the student with the institution and thus to ensure success in establishing what we call Bilateral Institutional Credibility (BIC).

While it is important to collect information via the websites, publications and *alumni*, nothing can replace the personal understanding of the environment through a visit to the institution itself. No amount of information received will replace 'the feel' one gets by being on the ground, talking with students and faculty, seeing the facilities and experiencing the approach with which they are received. But many international students do not have the possibility to visit higher institutions and must then rely on their counsellor to provide the most accurate picture possible. Thus matching the student with the institution becomes a science as well as an art; it is as much intuitive as it is calculating.

Another piece to the bridging process is to ensure that the skills and knowledge obtained in the K-12 environment are transferred to the higher education institution. At ACS, Athens, this process has

been achieved with the formation of an institute within the secondary schools which provides the forum through which the bridging takes place. Whilst establishing relationships with higher educational institutions, the secondary school administrators have the opportunity to identify and select institutions according to size, location and focus.

Faculty from these higher education institutions are invited to teach college level courses on the high school campus during a two to three week intensive period. No grades are assigned and thus teaching methods are flexible and an atmosphere of college-level seriousness and rigour is promoted. The institute's goal is to familiarise students with college-level teaching and promote a better understanding of the expectations in higher education while the college professors get to know their future students better.

In conclusion, education is a two-way street between primary-secondary and higher level education, a continuum that requires K-12 leaders at all levels to be open-minded, innovative in their teaching, and creative in their approach. Higher education leaders on the other hand need to make it a point to understand K-12 leaders, to exchange ideas, and to inspire them in order to best prepare students not only to succeed in higher education but to become productive and influential members of society. It is a two-way commitment with both ends reaping the benefits from the seeds they plant.

As travellers between the two worlds, K-12 and university education, we find it refreshing and inspiring to work with colleagues; leading educators on both ends of the spectrum who have the same goals; to teach, inspire and guide students to be the best that they can be. It is only natural then that we would want to see these two worlds unite in an effort to take education to another level. The bridging between the two worlds, we are convinced, will not only produce better learners but also better teachers.

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