

STUDENTS LIVING MEANINGFUL AND BALANCED LIVES

WOODSIDE PRIORY SCHOOL

PRIORY

SCHOOL
Woodside Priory School
Portola Valley, CA

GRADE LEVELS
6-12

PRESENTERS
Brian Schlaak
Assistant Head of School
Yvonne Faisal
Director of Systems & Innovation

HISTORY

Founded in 1957 by five Benedictine monks fleeing Soviet persecution in Eastern Europe, the Priory is a 6-12 independent day and boarding school located in Silicon Valley, CA. We are a mission-driven, whole child-centered, college preparatory educational institution that has a tradition of serving as a safe haven for young people to authentically be themselves. The school is oriented around five Benedictine values: Spirituality, Hospitality, Individuality, Integrity, and Community. Our mission is "to assist all students in creating meaningful and balanced lives, developing as lifelong learners and stewards, and productively serving a world in need of their gifts."

IDEAS

Our first step on the long and complex road to tackle student anxiety, sleep deprivation, right answer addiction, and cheating was to reach out to the Challenge Success program at Stanford University, located right down the street. With some basic guidelines in hand, we undertook a comprehensive and sweeping range of reforms in an effort to address the issues our students were facing. Our work can be divided into day hikes that fall into three separate categories or themes: Structural Reforms, Pedagogical and Programmatic Reforms, and Holistic/Spiritual Reforms. Here is a sampling of the types of changes we made in each of the three categories.

STRUCTURAL

- ▶ Changed mission statement to include balance and meaning
- ▶ Changed bell schedule to blocks
- ▶ Instituted Late Start Wednesdays
- ▶ Instituted No Homework Breaks
- ▶ Changed yearly calendar to end fall semester before the December break
- ▶ Reduced the number of graduation requirements

HOLISTIC/SPIRITUAL

- ▶ Expanded the schoolwide service program
- ▶ Expanded number and length of retreats
- ▶ Undertook deep exploration of the concept of integrity
- ▶ Made chapel more student-centered and holistic
- ▶ Introduced healthier food options
- ▶ Expanded the size and use of the school's garden
- ▶ Began a concentrated effort at educating the adult members of the community

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- ▶ Instituted Backwards Design Principles, including Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions
- ▶ Researched and implemented Authentic Assessment constructs
- ▶ Conducted extensive homework value explorations
- ▶ Limited maximum assessment value to 10 percent of the semester grade
- ▶ Instituted vertically articulated Learning Competencies: Critical Thinking, Communications, Creativity, Collaboration, and Resilience

DEFINITION OF BALANCE

- Balance arises from a sense of purpose and fulfillment.
- Balance is possible for those who feel valued for who they are.
- Balance is a dynamic practice that needs to be taught.
- Balance is a journey that requires time and space.
- Balance requires self-awareness and self-moderation.
- Balance requires humility, perspective, and flexibility.
- Balance is ultimately a spiritual pursuit.

IMPLEMENTATION

- Though our list of lessons learned and cautionary tales is quite extensive, here are the three big takeaways for schools interested in undertaking this type of work.
- ▶ Never lose sight of or fail to mention regularly the compelling "why of the work," to ground all decision making in what is best for the young people in our charge. Holistic student well-being and embodiment of the mission is both the reason for the existence of the school and the school's unshakeable responsibility, even when that work is difficult and complex.
 - ▶ Start with the structural. Through hard-earned wisdom shared with us by Challenge Success, we received the prudent counsel to start with the structural changes. Though these changes may appear to be the most daunting of the three options, they are also concrete and yield instantaneous, research-grounded results.
 - ▶ Encourage professional experimentation. Inculcate change culture, growth mindset, and collaboration through allocation of professional development time and resources. Hire into your model. Use turnover as a means to strategically move the change process forward. Strive to create a work environment that is a safe space to take risks, fail forward, and iterate.

OUR MISSION IS "TO ASSIST ALL STUDENTS IN CREATING MEANINGFUL AND BALANCED LIVES, DEVELOPING AS LIFELONG LEARNERS AND STEWARDS, AND PRODUCTIVELY SERVING A WORLD IN NEED OF THEIR GIFTS."

IMPERATIVE

Twelve years ago, in reading through the results of our Senior Exit Surveys, which are gleaned through one-on-one conversations between individual teachers and spring semester seniors, we discovered a widespread issue with student anxiety, sleep deprivation, right answer addiction, and cheating. While these concerns are not unique to our school, nor the independent school world, these realities flew directly in the face of our school's mission. Immediate action was necessary.

